

SRIKANTA

By Saratchandra
Chatterji. Translated
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With an Introduction
by E. J. Thompson.

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PREFACE

SARATCHANDRA CHATTERJI was born at Devanandapur, a small village in the Hugli District of Bengal, on September 15th, 1876. His grandfather had been an extremely wealthy man. But he lost everything, so that the novelist's father was poor. In Sarat Babu's own words, 'My childhood and youth were passed in great poverty. I received almost no education for want of means. From my father I inherited nothing except, as I believe, his restless spirit and his keen interest in literature. The first made me a tramp and sent me out tramping the whole of India quite early, and the second made me a dreamer all my life. Father was a great scholar, and he had tried his hand at stories and novels, dramas and poems, in short, every branch of literature, but never could finish anything. I have not his work now—somehow it got lost; but I remember poring over those incomplete mss. over and over again in my childhood, and many a night I kept awake regretting their incompleteness and thinking what might have been their conclusion if finished. Probably this led to my writing short stories when I was barely seventeen. But I soon gave up the habit as useless, and almost forgot in the long years that followed that I could even write a sentence in my boyhood. A mere accident made me start again, after the lapse of about eighteen years. Some of my old acquaintances started a little magazine, but no one of note would condescend to contribute to it, as it was so small

and insignificant. When almost hopeless, some of them suddenly remembered me, and after much persuasion they succeeded in extracting from me a promise to write for it. This was in the year 1913. I promised most unwillingly—perhaps only to put them off till I had returned to Rangoon and could forget all about it. But sheer volume and force of their letters and telegrams compelled me at last to think seriously about writing again. I sent them a short story, for their magazine *Janina*. This became at once extremely popular, and made me famous in one day. Since then I have been writing regularly. In Bengal perhaps I am the only fortunate writer who has not had to struggle’.

Very few of his fellow-novelists have had his experience of life. Mention of Rangoon above reminds us that he lived for many years in Burma, serving in a Government office. He thus had the inestimable advantage of viewing his land and people from outside. His fiction deals very largely with social problems, and with tyrannies ‘that have obsessed the modern Bengali life against reason and humanity’.¹ Especially, he handles the dowry-system and the difficulty felt by the upper classes in marrying their girls. No problem is more insistent with the educated classes to-day. The sales of his books have been enormous, greater than those of any other Indian novelist.

Srikanta is his most ambitious book, in style and scope. It is understood to be largely autobiography. Like most autobiographical novels, it is rather a string of episodes than a connected story. This is not the place for criticism. But it may be permissible to draw attention to its value

1. In a letter to the writer.

as showing the view taken of themselves by Bengalis, and as bringing the foreign reader closer to Indian life than perhaps any other work given to the outer world. The earlier chapters are a sort of Bengali *Huckleberry Finn*; and the Ganges escapade of the two boys is a fine piece of writing, as is also the night on the burning-*ghat* later on in the book. The translator, Mr. K. C. Sen, has done admirably in his rendering of these two elaborate passages.

The novel was an exotic in Bengal. Its course can be epitomised under three names. Bankimchandra Chatterji took Scott as his model, and popularised the new form in a very short time. Bankim was propagandist as well as novelist, and his work was often a reconstruction of earlier days in his country, as his imagination pictured them. His handling of those days may be compared profitably with Scott's revival of former history. Neither he nor Scott is impartial, as a historian is supposed to be, both frankly taking sides. But Bankim knew his surroundings, and his pictures of Bengali life would be better known abroad if they were accessible in better translations. Even as it is, he is a name that has reached the wider world. Rabindranath Tagore belonged to the Brahmo Samaj, and to the most cultured and eclectic family in that circle. He has told me that he does not consider that he has been quite familiar with ordinary Hindu life, and the criticism is often made by his own countrymen that his novels and short stories depict what is really Brahmo life. When he was passing out of his teens, Bankim hailed him as his successor and the younger man repaid him by grateful appreciation. The one sharp division between them, a breach happily healed by the generosity of both men, came from their different attitude towards Hindu society and religion. Bankim

grew increasingly conservative—always a conservative, he became in his last days reactionary ; whereas Rabindranath has been always a critic, as uncompromising as he thought the truth required. Irony and criticism are never absent from his fiction. But his greatness is as a poet, and his novels, with the exception of *The Home and the World*—which is really a series of episodes treated in the manner of short stories—, are not among his best work. One other, *Gora*, has fine qualities, and Sarat Babu regards it much as Stevenson did *The Egoist*. ‘I have read it at least twenty times,’ he says. This is the link—this, and Rabindranath’s short stories, many of which are with the finest short stories ever written,—between Bankim and Sarat, and this is the way in which the torch which the former handed to the young poet of *Evening Songs*, nearly forty years ago, has from Rabindranath reached the most prominent living novelist of Bengal.

Sarat Babu has gone to the world of to-day, and given us pictures of the present. In his work criticism of society is found, but it is not the radical criticism of such a fearless work as *The Home and the World*—one of the most courageous books ever written, for which Rabindranath deserves a salute from everyone who loves a brave man—and such stories as *Living or Dead* and *Subha*. It does not seriously break a spear with tradition. Yet he has not escaped attack. *Srikanta* is written round his favourite social theme, the problem which is constantly exercising his mind—society’s attitude towards the professional and public woman. The reader will be glad that he has made Rajlakshmi so attractive.

The second and third parts of *Srikanta* have been published. The present volume is only the first part. The

translator is responsible for the greater part of the footnotes. Valuable advice and help in preparing the book for publication have been given by Messrs. N. Carrington and C. W. Stewart.

Edward J. Thompson.

SRIKANTA

WHAT memories and thoughts crowd into my mind, as, at the threshold of the afternoon of my wandering life, I sit down to write the story of its morning hours !

From my childhood to the present day it has always been the same. My friends and kinsmen with one accord have kept up a running comment on my life, summed up in an invariable 'Fie !' or 'Shame !' Nor has my mind ever had the hardihood to challenge this estimate as anything but just and fair. But to-day, as I sit down to unravel the memories of long ago and investigate how even the morning of my life came to have a prefacing 'Shame !' affixed to it, I am suddenly assailed by an unwonted doubt. I feel that perhaps this degradation into which, by universal report, my life has sunk, may not after all have been necessarily so low as my contemporaries have always thought. May it not be, so the question shapes itself in my mind, that those whom God summons to the heart of His wonderful creation, are not the people who have had the opportunity to shine as the best boys at school and pass examinations, nor those gentlemen who sweep grandly through life in a coach and pair with pomp and retinue, finishing up with the publication of their

'Memoirs' at the end? Providence endows its favorite children, it would seem, with some amount of sense, but not what men of experience would call sound common sense. The desires and curious longings which pursue them through life are so incongruous and strange, so wayward and fantastic, that a description of them would probably evoke unmeasured derision from the wise. History does not record how the bad boy grows up, unloved and uncared for, led into evil ways by the attraction of evil, hit and knocked about by unpleasant experiences, till one day, at last, he slips off unnoticed, with the burden of universal contumely and evil repute on his shoulders, into the eternal silence and oblivion of the land without a name.

But no more of this. Let me tell you just what I have got to tell, though that, you must know, is easier said than done.

Before I describe how my wandering life began, I must introduce the person who initiated me into its joys. His name was Indranath. Whether he is alive or dead to-day I do not know. Many years ago he passed out of my life. One day very early in the morning he left his home and his people and everything he possessed, with nothing on him but the clothes he wore: and he never returned again. But I shall never forget the day I met him.

It was at a football match between Hindu and Moslem students on our school playground. It was growing dark, and I was standing engrossed, watching the game. Suddenly, all in a flash, came sounds of beating and blows, and cries of 'At him! Catch him! Down with him!' The game had turned into a riot. In two or three minutes the whole crowd had fled leaving only a few

rioters, while I stood dazed and surprised. It was only when I found the stick of an umbrella broken on my back with a thwack and saw two or three other umbrellas raised above my head, that I came back to my senses. Five or six Musalman boys had surrounded me, leaving no way of escape.

Another umbrella fell on me, and yet another. Just at that moment somebody made his way at lightning speed through the human wall around me and stood by my side. It was Indranath.

He was a dark boy, with a finely chiselled nose, a broad, well-modelled forehead, and a few smallpox marks on his face. Though older than I, he was about my height. 'Don't be afraid,' he said: 'come right behind me out of this.' The courage and chivalrous spirit of the boy were remarkable enough, but the first thing I noticed was the extraordinary power of his arms. I am not speaking merely of physical strength; his arms were long enough to reach below his knees. Indranath's great advantage in fighting was that his opponent never dreamt that, in case of need, this short young man could suddenly shoot out an arm four feet long and bring down a fist of proportionate size on an unwary nose. One would rather call it a tiger's paw.

In about two minutes I had come out, following his lead, to a comparatively safe place. 'Run,' said Indra without further comment. As I began to run, I asked, 'And you?' But he answered rudely, 'Run, you ass: don't argue.'

But, ass or no ass, I remember distinctly, I turned round all of a sudden and said, 'I wor't.'

Srikanta

‘You won’t?’ Indra replied. ‘Do you mean to wait till you get a good drubbing, my boy? There, they are coming from that side. Come, let us run.’

That was a thing that I could always do to perfection. When we came upon the main thoroughfare, the evening was already dark. Lamps had been lit in the shops, and the municipal kerosene lamps on the road had begun to glimmer on the tops of their iron posts, one here and one far away, twinkling at an unconscionable distance; it was possible for a person blest with keen sight, standing near the one, to make out the other. We had left our pursuers far behind. When Indra spoke, it was with the most natural voice imaginable. My throat had become dry, but I had not even once heard him breathing hard. It was as if nothing had happened. ‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘Srikanta.’

‘Srikanta,—good,’ and, thrusting his hand into his pocket, he brought out a handful of dry leaves. He put some of them into his mouth and gave me the rest, saying, ‘I’ve given them a good drubbing. Chew these.’

‘What are they?’

‘*Siddhi*.’¹

I was greatly surprised and said, ‘*Siddhi*? I don’t chew *siddhi*.’ Indranath looked still more surprised. ‘You don’t?’ he said. ‘What an ass you are! Just chew the leaves and you’ll get intoxicated. Chew them and swallow them.’

1. A common intoxicant; dry leaves of *Cannabis sativa*.

Not knowing at that age the fascination of intoxication, I declined his offer and returned the leaves to him. He put them into his mouth, chewed them, and swallowed them.

‘ Well then, smoke a cigarette.’ So saying, he took two cigarettes and a box of matches out of his pocket and, giving me one cigarette, lit the other himself. Then, holding it in a curious manner between both his palms, as one would smoke a *chillim*,¹ he began to draw in the smoke. And oh, what vigorous pulls ! At one pull the flame reached from one end of the cigarette nearly to the other. There were people all round us and I asked timidly, ‘ What if anyone sees you smoking ? ’

‘ What if they do ? ’ he answered. ‘ Everybody knows.’ He disappeared round the corner of the street, smoking with a nonchalant air, leaving a profound impression on my mind.

To-day I can recall many a detail of the happenings of that day. But I cannot remember whether I loved that strange boy or inwardly despised him for having dared to chew *siddhi* and to smoke cigarettes in public.

A month had passed since the day of the match. The night was dark and warm: not a leaf was stirring. We had all had our beds made on the roof of our house; it was near midnight, and yet no one could get to sleep. All at once the music of a flute floated to our ears. What sweetness that simple *Ramprasadi*² tune scattered in the

1. An Indian pipe made of clay.

2. Ramprasad was a folk-poet of the later eighteenth century.

darkness ! It was a tune I had heard times without number, but I did not know, coming from a bamboo pipe, it could be so sweet, so entrancing. Towards the south-east of the house was a large garden full of mango and jack trees. Nobody bestowed any care on it, and it had grown into a rank jungle through which the hoofs of cattle had marked out a thin path. It was along that path that the music was approaching.

My aunt sat up and addressing her eldest son, said, 'Nabin, is that the Rays' boy, Indra ?'

Yes, all of them knew the player of the nocturnal music, and my cousin answered, 'Who but that scapegrace could play such music or would enter that jungle ?'

'Then it is he. Is he really coming through the Gossains' garden ?'

Nabin replied that he was. Perhaps my aunt felt a tremor of fear as she thought of the thick jungle in that impenetrable darkness. With fear in her voice, she asked, 'But doesn't his mother forbid him ? Any number of people have been bitten by snakes in the Gossains' garden. What takes him there, I wonder, so late at night ?'

'Well,' said my cousin with a laugh, 'that is the short cut between his part of the village and this: that's all. Do you think, mother, that he who has no fear and no care for his life will come by the roundabout way ? All he wants is to come quickly; it matters little whether on the way he has to cross rivers or meet snakes or face tigers !'

'What a dare-devil boy !' said my aunt, and with a sigh lapsed into silence. The sound of the flute grew

gradually clearer and then slowly faded and faded till it died away in the distance.

That was Indranath. The first day I met him I had thought, 'If I could only possess his strength and fight like him !' And this night the one thought that kept revolving in my mind till I fell asleep was, 'Would that I could play on the bamboo flute like Indranath !'

But how was I to strike up an acquaintance with him ? He was far above me, and was not even at school. I had heard that, being aggrieved by the headmaster's perverse decision to put the 'donkey cap' on his head, he had contemptuously scaled the railings of the school-compound and had gone home, never to return to school again. Long afterwards I learnt from his own mouth that his offence had been very trivial indeed. It had been a habit with the up-country Pundit to go off to sleep in his classroom. On one of these occasions Indranath with a pair of scissors curtailed the length of the Brahminical rat's tail on the Pundit's head. Not much harm had been done : for the teacher, on his return home, had found the lost tuft inside the pocket of his own long coat. Indranath had failed to understand why the Pundit had been unable to forgive him and had even made a complaint to the headmaster. He knew, however, that for one who had left school by the original procedure of scaling the railings, the school-gates hardly remained open in welcome. Nor did he greatly care whether they remained open or closed to him. In spite of the efforts of the numerous elders in the house, to whom Indra's attitude should have been one of implicit obedience, he never turned his face towards the school again. He exchanged his pen for an oar, spending whole days on the Ganges in a canoe.

Srikanta

He had a small dinghy of his own: in rain and in storm, by day and by night, he was always to be seen alone in his boat. Suddenly, one day, he would float down the stream in his dinghy sitting still at the helm, and for fifteen days he would not be heard of again. It was when he was starting on one of these roving that I got an opportunity of cementing our acquaintance into something closer.

It had rained the whole day and was still raining. The heavy sky of July was overcast with dark clouds, and thick darkness had come on before it was fairly evening. My cousins and I had taken our meals early and according to our invariable custom had sat down before our books on a bed spread out in the sitting-room, to study by the light of a castor-oil lamp. Outside, my uncle was taking his evening siesta on a canvas cot at one end of the verandah, and at the other end old Ramkamal Bhattachaj, after his usual dose of opium, was smoking a *hookah*, his eyes closed in the gloom. The up-country servants in the portico outside were reading Tulsidas's *Ramayana* in a sing-song drawl, and we three cousins were attending to our studies in silence under the strict supervision of Mejda.¹

Chhotda,² Jatinda, and I were students of the third and fourth classes, and our Mejda of grave aspect, having failed in the Entrance Examination³ twice, was now,

1. 'The middle senior brother or cousin', i.e., brother or cousin just younger than the eldest.

2. 'The little senior brother or cousin', i.e., the youngest senior brother or cousin. 'Da' is a contraction of 'Dada' which means elder brother.

3. Now Matriculation Examination.

with solemn application and profound attention, preparing for it the third time. Under his iron rule none of us could waste a single moment in idle distractions. Our study time was from 7-30 to 9 P.M. In order that we might not disturb Mejda's serious studies by talking during this period, he used every day, as a preliminary measure, to cut twenty or thirty small slips of paper somewhat like railway tickets. He would then mark some of them 'Out', some 'Spitting', some 'Blowing the nose', some 'Thirst', and so on. Imagine Jatinda dying for a drink. He would take a ticket. Mejda would sign it and endorse 'allowed from 8-33 to 8-34½', meaning that this was the period within which the thirst was to be satisfied. As soon as Jatinda went out with the ticket in hand, Chhotda presented a ticket for 'Spitting'; but, by an endorsement of 'No', Mejda signified his disapproval. In consequence, Chhotda sat still with a grave face for two minutes and then brought up a petition for 'Thirst'. This time Mejda accorded his sanction, writing, 'Allowed from 8-41 to 8-47'. As soon as Chhotda had gone out beaming with the permit, Jatinda returned and presented his ticket to Mejda. Mejda compared the time noted on the ticket with the clock, took out a book, and pasted down the ticket on one of its pages. All the requisite materials for these varied operations used to be kept close at hand. At the end of the week, if on some occasions we had overstayed our leave or if our requests for tickets had been too frequent, we were called upon to explain.

Thus, under Mejda's extremely vigilant and orderly government, neither we nor he wasted a single instant of our allotted time for study. Every night when we proceeded to bed after such intense application to books

the Goddess Saraswati¹ must certainly have escorted us as far as our bedroom door. It is easy to imagine with what laurels we returned home next day after school was over. But it was Mejda's peculiar misfortune that his examiners could not appreciate him at his true worth. In spite of his possessing such an overpowering love of learning and such an exacting sense of responsibility as regards the true value of time, the examiners went on 'ploughing' him year after year. Such is the blind judgment of fate ! But let that pass. What will it profit us to inquire further into his sorrows now ?

On that particular night we four sat deep in our books in the mild lamplight of the room, while outside on the verandah the two old men drowsed in the deepening gloom.

As soon as Chhotda returned from outside I began to feel parched with an uncontrollable thirst. Consequently I presented my application in the prescribed form and waited expectant. Mejda opened the book pasted over with tickets, and his face bent down over it as he began a rigorous scrutiny to see whether my thirst was lawful or not, that is, to what extent I had satisfied my thirst on the days immediately preceding.

All at once there was a growl, like 'Hoom', close to my back, and simultaneously deafening cries arose from Chhotda and Jatinda, uttered in unison in voices full of alarm, 'My God, I am killed !' Before I could turn my head round and see who or what it was that was killing them, Mejda raised his head, and all at once, with a

1. Goddess of Learning.

terrible unearthly sound, shot out his legs with lightning rapidity, overturning the lamp-stand. Then in the darkness began a reign of terror and chaos. Mejda was subject to fits. The last that I saw of him was when he overturned the lamp and fell upon the floor, groaning inarticulately.

When, after much jostling and pushing, I at last forced my way out of the room, I found my uncle holding a son under either arm and shouting with even greater vigour than they ; it looked as if the sons and father were having a competition as to who could open his mouth the widest.

A cry was raised that a thief had been seen running away and that the up-country servants at the gate had caught him. My uncle began to bawl out at the top of his voice, 'Beat him, beat the rascal to death !'

Lights were brought, and in an instant the courtyard was filled with servants and neighbours. After the up-country servants had nearly beaten the life out of the thief, they dragged him towards the light, and threw him down. But when his face was seen, there was a sudden revulsion of feeling. 'Good God ! but this is Mr. Bhatchaj !'

Then some ran to bring water, some began to fan him. Inside the room others of us were similarly occupied with Mejda.

When, after much dashing of water on his face and strenuous fanning, Ramkamal Bhatchaj was restored to consciousness, he sobbed out, 'Holy God ! It wasn't a tiger, but a huge bear. It came out of the room at a single bound.'

‘It wasn’t a bear, father,’ said Chhotda and Jatinda again and again. ‘It was a wolf. It growled ‘Hoom’ and sat on the doormat on its curled tail.’

When Mejda revived sufficiently, he heaved a deep sigh, with his eyes still closed, and ejaculated, ‘The royal Bengal tiger !’

But where was it ? Whether royal Bengal tiger or wolf or bear, how could it have come into the house, and where had it gone ? When so many people had seen it, there must certainly have been something.

Some of us believed and some of us remained sceptical ; but all began to search, lantern in hand, the fear of the unknown imprinted on every face.

All of a sudden, Kishori Sing, the wrestler, said, ‘There, there he sits’, and with one bound he flew to the verandah, followed by a pushing, jostling, elbowing throng, each one anxious to squeeze himself into the verandah, and none able to wait for a moment. There was a pomegranate tree at one end of the courtyard. Beneath its bushy branches a big animal was plainly seen ; yes, it was exactly like a tiger. In the twinkling of an eye the verandah became empty and the sitting-room was filled with a panic-stricken crowd. From the midst of this crowd came the excited voice of my uncle, ‘Get some spears—get some guns.’ By guns he meant an old match-lock affair, with a ramrod, belonging to our neighbour Gagan Babu. There was certainly no objection to getting it, but who was to bring it ? The pomegranate tree was close to the first gate : and there the tiger was sitting quietly. The up-country servants had grown dumb, nor did one hear any offer from the neighbours who had come to see the fun.

While we were in this predicament Indra appeared suddenly, Heaven knows from where. Perhaps he was passing along the road in front, and had come in on hearing the hubbub. In an instant a hundred voices cried, 'Look out ! there's a tiger ! Come away at once, you foolish boy !'

Startled at first, he ran into the verandah. But when, shortly after, he had heard everything, he took a lantern and went down, nothing daunted, to look for the tiger.

Behind the windows upstairs were the ladies in breathless silence, taking the name of the Goddess Durga as they looked on this reckless boy. My aunt broke out into sobs from sheer fright. Below, standing in a close phalanx in the crowd, the up-country servants began to encourage Indra in his exploit, and even hinted that they would come down too if they could secure any weapons.

When Indra had had a good, long look at the beast, he said, 'Dwarika Babu, this is no tiger.' No sooner had he finished the words than the royal Bengal tiger put his two forepaws together and broke into a human cry. In the clearest Bengali he protested, 'No, sir, I am no tiger. I am neither tiger nor bear: I am Chinath the mimic.'

Indra laughed aloud. Mr. Bhattachaj, wooden shoes in hand, was the first to advance towards the masquerader. 'You rascal,' he cried, 'can't you find any other place for frightening people out of their wits ?'

In terrible wrath my uncle passed the order, 'Drag the scoundrel here by the ears.'

Kishori Sing, who had seen the intruder first, had naturally the right to carry out this order ; so he seized

the wretched fellow's ears and ruthlessly dragged him into the centre of the courtyard.

Mr. Bhatchaj, in the heat of his indignation, dealt a blow with his wooden shoe on the back of the 'tiger', and began to stutter in execrable Hindustani, 'I have got all my bones broken on account of this rascal. I have been beaten to a pulp by these up-country roughs . . .'

The mimic Chinath's home was at Baraset whence he came once a year to earn a few rupees by his profession. Only the day before he had come to our house disguised as Narad, the divine ascetic minstrel, and had treated us to his songs. He now fell at the feet of Mr. Bhatchaj, and then of my uncle. He said that he too had been frightened by Mejda's overturning the lamp and starting the terrible uproar, and had run and hidden himself behind the trees, thinking that he would show his performance later when the confusion had subsided; though now events had taken such a turn that he had no courage left for anything. But though he prayed and entreated, my uncle was adamant and showed no signs of relenting.

Suddenly my aunt from her vantage point upstairs took a part in the discussion. 'It is lucky for you that it wasn't a real tiger or bear, for you're a brave lot, you and your sturdy door-keepers. Let the poor wretch alone, and don't forget to send those up-country good-for-nothings about their business. The whole lot of you haven't got half the courage a little boy possesses.'

My uncle made no reply but assumed an aspect meant to suggest that it would be the easiest thing in the world to refute his wife's taunts, if he were so minded, but that it would be beneath his dignity to pay any attention to the remarks of a mere woman. In a still more wrath-

ful tone he passed the order, 'Cut off his tail.' Chinath's long tail, composed of straw wrapped in coloured cloth, was then cut off and he was turned out of the house, while my aunt, who saw everything, simply remarked, 'Yes, keep it for yourself : you will find it useful.'

'Well, Srikanta,' said Indra to me as we stood together apart from the crowd, 'so this is where you live.'

'Yes,' said I, 'but where were you going so late to-night ?'

'So late !' he answered, laughing. 'Why, it's only just evening. I am going to my dinghy to catch fish. Will you come ?'

'In your boat ?' I asked timidly. 'On such a dark night as this ?'

He laughed again. 'Cheer up, that's just what makes it great fun. And, besides, you can't catch fish, you know, except in the dark. Can you swim ?'

'Rather !'

'Come along, then,' and he caught hold of my hand. 'I can't row so far up-stream alone : I've been looking for someone who would not be afraid.'

I did not say another word. Holding his hand I went with him silently out to the road. At first I could hardly believe that I was really going on a fishing expedition in a canoe. I had little power then of realizing what a tremendous attraction it was that made me defy the stern discipline of our house, and that brought me out on the road in the deepening gloom of the night. We soon came to the path leading to the awful jungle of the Gossains, and I followed Indra through it, like one hypnotised, till we came to the bank of the Ganges at the jungle's end.

It was a steep, gravelly bank. Above our head spread the branches of an old *pipal* tree in ghostly silence, like the features of 'darkness visible', while forty feet below, in concentrated gloom, the swollen torrents of mid-July dashed against the bank, swirled up into whirlpools, and then rushed madly by. I could dimly see Indra's little canoe tied below. From above, it looked like a tiny sauce-boat, dashed helplessly against the bank by the force of the mighty currents. I was not altogether a coward, but when Indra pointed to a rope below and said, 'That rope is tied to the boat: hold fast to it by your feet and slide down carefully. Mind, if once your feet slip there will be nothing left of you', my heart gave a jump. 'Impossible' was the word that leapt to my brain. But yet I had the rope to cling to. 'And what about you?' I asked.

'As soon as you are in I shall untie the rope and get down. Don't be afraid, there are lots of roots and grasses by which I can hold on.'

Without saying another word, I clung to the rope and with infinite difficulty and care I landed in the canoe. Indra then unloosed the rope and climbed down. I do not know to this day by what he supported himself as he descended. My heart began to beat so violently that I could not even look at him. For two or three minutes I heard nothing but the wild roar of the immense waters. A little laugh suddenly made me turn my face, and I saw Indra pushing the canoe with both his hands and leaping into it at a bound. The little dinghy swerved sharply round in a circle and then sped swiftly forward like a shooting star.

II

IN a few moments the darkness had closed in upon us. All that could be discerned were the swollen waters, immense and dim, flowing in parallel lines on the right and left, and, buoyed up between, the swift little canoe and the two boys in it. Everything else was blotted out. I had not then reached the age at which I could realise the solemn immensity of this aspect of Nature, but I have not forgotten to this day what I saw on that night. It was the vast incarnate form of midnight gloom that shaped itself before my eyes, still and silent without the stir of a breath, lonely and companionless as death itself. Dark masses of her hair covered the earth and the heavens, and through the intense gloom, flashing from the limitless currents which shot out like enormous, glistening rows of teeth, appeared a dim phosphorescence, sinister and malevolent, like a hard, mocking smile half-suppressed. Here a rushing current would suddenly strike against the bed of the river and, rising, burst into foam ; there, cross-currents would meet, and dashing together create a whirlpool, and all about us were mad, unimpeded masses of water sweeping furiously by.

I could just feel that our canoe was crossing the river diagonally. But it was beyond my power to observe to what landmark or spot on the opposite bank Indra was steering it through the inky darkness. I did not know then what an experienced steersman he was. Suddenly he said to me, ' Well, Srikanta, are you afraid ? '

‘Well, no,’ I answered.

‘That’s right,’ said Indra, much pleased. ‘What is there to fear if you know how to swim?’

A suppressed gasp was my only reply. My uninformed mind could see no difference between swimming on such a night in the midst of those mad current and swift-flowing tides, and a total inability to swim. But Indra did not utter another word.

After a long time I heard a new sound, muffled and faint ; it grew clearer and louder as our canoe proceeded further onward. It sounded like an angry and threatening call, uttered from many throats at a long distance, and wafted across many barriers and impediments. Though heavy with weariness, the sound was incessant, without a break ; the anger of those unseen presences did not appear to abate or to increase, and showed no signs of ever coming to an end. At irregular intervals came sounds suggestive of a sudden crash or abrupt splash. ‘What sound is that, Indra?’ I asked. ‘It is the sound of the sandy bank opposite being broken off by the currents,’ he replied as he again set the prow of the canoe in the direction towards which he was steering.

‘How high is the bank?’ I asked, ‘and what is the force of the currents?’

‘Oh, tremendous. The water is black: we can’t pass under the bank to-night. If it should break above us we and the canoe would be smashed to smithereens. Can you row, Srikanta?’

‘Oh, yes, I can.’

‘Then row.’

I began to row, and heard Indra say, 'Look this way. There ! Do you see something black on the left ? That's a reef. A canal passes through it, and we shall have to go through the canal ; but, mind you, as slow as anything ! You see, if the fishermen find us out they won't let us come back alive. They will knock our heads to atoms with their poles and bury us deep in the mud.' Terror-stricken, I answered, 'Don't let's go that way then.' Perhaps Indra laughed a little as he said, 'But there is no other way. We must pass through that canal. Even steamers could not force a way through the strong current that flows beside the big reef yonder there, and how could we do it ? We can come back that way, but not go now.' 'Then,' said I, as I pulled in the oar, 'let's have no more of this business.'

In an instant the canoe took a sharp curve round and sped back with the current. 'Why did you come then ?' asked Indra, greatly disgusted, and in a threatening whisper he added, 'All right ! I'll take you back again, coward !'

I was in my fifteenth year, and to be called a coward ! In a flash I put out my oar and began to row for all I was worth. 'Right !' said Indra. 'But easy, my boy ! The fishermen are terrible ruffians. I will steer beside the willow trees through that field of maize so that the rascals will know nothing of it.' And then he said laughing, 'And what if they do ? It won't be so easy to catch us. Look here, Srikanta, never you fear. The idiots have got as many as four canoes, it's true, but when you find that they are drawing all round us and there is no way of escape, then down you jump into the water. You dive, and come out as far away as you can. Do you see ? It

will beat them all to find us in this darkness. Won't it be fun to swim to Satua's reef and to come across in the morning to our bank and then walk back home along the river ? What can the beggars do ?'

I had heard the name of the reef before. 'But Satua's reef is such a long way off !' I protested.

'You call that a long way ?' said Indra in utter indifference. 'It is hardly twelve or fifteen miles. If your arms get tired, all you have got to do is to keep afloat on your back: besides, you will get plenty of half-burnt logs of wood floating by you, logs with which dead bodies have been burnt.'

As soon as I realised the meaning of Indra's programme of escape, the stout heart within me contracted to a very small point. After rowing for a while longer I asked, 'But what will become of your dinghy ?'

'The other day,' said Indra, 'I made my escape just in this way. Next day I came back and took my dinghy from them. I said somebody else must have taken it for the night without my knowledge, and that it wasn't I.'

Then the escape he had been picturing was no idle dream or fancy, but an actual possibility, as proved by his previous experience !

The canoe went up to an opening between two reefs, through which water flowed as in a canal: at its mouth were tied a number of fishermen's boats in a row, their lamps burning dimly. We went round one of the reefs to the other side, where the force of the water had created several passages for its flow, and the mouth of each of these openings was hidden from the view of the rest by clumps of casuarina trees. Passing through one

of these openings we came into the central canal and saw fishermen's boats looking like dark bushes in the distance. A little further, and we had arrived at our destination.

The fishermen who guarded the main gateway of the canal had not thought it necessary to set any guard over this spot. They had set up here what is called the 'net lure'. When the canal is dry, fishermen plant wooden posts in a row from one end of the canal to the other and fix a net on the outer side of these posts. Then in the rainy season when big fish like *rohi* and *katla* come down the canal they leap over the posts to avoid them and get caught in the net.

In the twinkling of an eye Indra landed five or six *rohies* and *katlas* weighing ten, fifteen, or twenty *seers*¹ each. The huge fish seemed to do their best to break the frail canoe to pieces, lashing their tails against its sides and flapping noisily about.

'What will you do with so many fish, Indra?'

'I want them. But that is enough now. Let's get away', and he let the net go from his hand. There was now no further need for rowing, and I sat still. We were making for the opening through which we had come, going as secretly as before. After being carried down the canal by the swift current for two or three minutes, our little canoe, with a sudden jerk, entered the adjoining field of maize. Taken unawares by this sudden change of direction, I asked, 'What's the matter? What has happened?' Indra sent the canoe further inland with another push, and whispered, 'Silence! The rascals have

1. One *seer* = 2 lbs. approximately.

got the scent—they are coming this way in all the four boats—look !’ He was right : making much noise with their sturdy oars, the boats were advancing like demons eager to swallow us. Behind was the net spread across the canal and in front were our enemies—which way could we turn for escape ? I did not think it possible for us to conceal ourselves in the field of maize.

‘Do tell me what we are to do !’ As I gasped the words, tears choked my voice. Who was there to prevent these men from killing us in this horrible trap and doing away with all trace of our dead bodies by burying them in this very field ?

Indra had before played the role of a triumphant thief successfully and had reached home safely, but this time—?

He merely said, ‘There’s nothing to fear’, but I thought I could detect a tremor in his voice. However, not for a moment did he stop to think. Discarding the oar for one of the dinghy’s long poles, he pushed with all his force, trying to get as far inland as possible and thus conceal our canoe. The whole reef had been inundated with water, above which, to a height of ten or twelve feet, rose crops of maize or *jowari*. Through the jungle of stalks we two thieves worked our way. The water was at some places chest-deep, and at others not deeper than the waist or knee. Above us there was pitch darkness, and on all sides of us impenetrable forest. The pushing poles began to stick in the mud, and the canoe could hardly move. From behind came indistinct sounds of the fishermen’s talk. There could be no doubt that something had raised their suspicion and that they were still reconnoitring the whole area.

Suddenly the canoe gave a lurch to one side. When it regained its balance, I found that I was the only person on board ; Indra had disappeared. Stricken with fear, I cried out 'Indra !' From inside the jungle at a distance of about ten feet came the response, 'I am overboard.'

'Why ?'

'I shall have to drag the boat out of this. I've got the rope tied round my waist.'

'Where will you drag her out to ?'

'To the main river. A short pull will take us back.' I said not a word more. We began to advance slowly. All of a sudden the sound of kerosene tins being beaten and the snapping of split bamboos, coming from inside the jungle a short distance away, startled me. 'What is that ?' I asked, overcome with fear. 'It is the peasants sitting on their lofts,' Indra replied, 'and frightening away the wild boars.' 'Wild boars ! Where ?'

'How can I tell you ? I can't see them, of course. They must be somewhere about here,' he said, in his non-chalant manner.

I had not the heart to utter another word. 'Surely,' I thought, 'the person I saw first this morning must have had a most inauspicious face!'¹ Only that evening in our own house I had almost fallen into the jaws of a tiger ! What wonder then, that in this jungle I should fall an easy prey to wild boars ! But at any rate I was

1. The belief is that there are persons the sight of whose faces, if they happen to be the first faces seen in the morning, is sure to make the day most unlucky and evil.

in the canoe : my companion, wading through the jungle in mud and water as high as his chest, unable, should the occasion arise, to turn aside a step—who knew what fate awaited him? Fifteen minutes passed in silence. As we advanced haltingly I noticed every now and then a curious sound—a sharp rustle, as if the head of a *jowari* or maize stalk were being violently shaken, and then a splash. This happened once quite near my hand. Timidly I drew Indra's attention to it. 'If it were not a big bear, might it be a young one ?'

'That's nothing,' he said in the easiest of tones: 'those are snakes that have coiled themselves on the stalks ; when they get frightened they jump down into the water.' 'This was nothing ! Only snakes !' Trembling in every limb I sat huddled up in the middle of the canoe. With a sinking heart I asked, almost in a whisper, 'What kind of snakes ?'

'There are all kinds,' said Indra, '*dhora*, *bora*, *cobra*, *krait*—they come floating in the water and coil themselves round trees and stalks. Don't you see there's no land here ?'

Of course I saw that. But while a paroxysm of fright made my hair stand on end, that strange young man, without a sign of alarm, went on, saying as he plodded onward, 'But they don't bite. They are themselves so panicky, you know ; two or three of them just brushed my body as they fled. Some of them are very big too—they must be *boras* or *dhoras*, I think. And what if they do bite ! One must die some day, my boy.' He went on in this strain in the most natural manner possible : some of his remarks reached my ears and some not. I sat speechless, beside myself with fear, still as a block

of wood, afraid even to breathe ; for what could prevent one of them taking a plunge down on to the canoe itself ?

Minutes passed, and at last I could perceive that we were gradually approaching some roaring concourse of waters. I understood, without further questioning, that at the end of this jungle flowed the furious and awe-inspiring river which even steamers could not cross at that time of the year. I could plainly feel the currents becoming swifter and swifter, and the grey masses of foam produced the illusion of large stretches of sand. Indra clambered into the canoe and, taking the paddle in his hand, sat expectant, ready for the impetuous river ahead. 'There is nothing more to fear,' he said. 'Here we come upon the main river.' 'Well and good, if there is nothing to fear,' was my inward comment ; 'though I haven't yet been able to find out what there is that would excite your fear.' The next instant a slight tremor passed over the whole canoe, and in the twinkling of an eye I found that she was rushing along at lightning speed, borne by the great tide of the main river.

The moon was then rising behind the scattered clouds ; for the darkness in which we had begun our expedition no longer existed. We could now see, though dimly, a good distance on every side. We left the wild casuarina trees and the reef of *jowari* and maize to our right and proceeded straight ahead.

III

‘**I** FEEL so awfully sleepy, Indra. Do let us go back home.’ Indra laughed softly, and there was a woman’s tenderness in his voice as he said, ‘Of course you feel sleepy, my boy : but I can’t help it, Srikanta. We shall be a little late—I have got a lot to do yet. But why don’t you lie down here and have some sleep ?’

I did not need to be told a second time. I lay down, huddled together on the narrow board on which I had been sitting. But I found it impossible to fall asleep. In silence and with half-closed eyes I watched the hide-and-seek of the moonlight and the clouds in the sky. The dull monotony of the water’s hiss and roar came to my ears in an unending stream. I wonder now how I could have lost myself utterly in that game of the clouds and the moon. That was hardly an age for such entrancing reveries. Perhaps, after all, as grown-ups say, neither the moon nor the clouds are so real as the mind : perhaps my mind, after passing through our wild and strange adventures, wanted just at that hour to repose, listless and weary, in the calm, unearthly beauty of the night.

About two hours must have passed in this way, though indeed I lay unconscious of the passage of time. Suddenly I felt as if the moon had dived under the clouds on my right and, after a long swim, emerged on my left.

Raising my head, I saw that our canoe was preparing to cross the river. I had little energy left for asking questions and lay down again as before. Once more I watched the play of the moon and the clouds and listened to the roar of the water. Thus another hour must have passed away.

Swish !—our canoe had come up on the sandbanks. Sitting up, I saw that we had crossed over to our own side of the river. But what place was this ? How far away was our home ? Nothing but immense wastes of sand lay before us. Suddenly I heard the barking of dogs. Surely, I thought, sitting up, there must be human habitations close by.

‘Just wait for a bit, will you ?’ said Indra. ‘I’ll be back presently: there is nothing to be afraid of. Just over there are fishermen’s huts.’

I had no desire to show myself unequal to the occasion, after having passed so many difficult tests. So without the least hesitation I said, ‘Why should I be afraid ? I will wait for you here.’ Indra said nothing more and in an instant disappeared out of sight.

Above me, the same hide-and-seek of light and darkness ; behind, the long, unceasing, murmurous moan of the big river, and before me, dim stretches of a sandy bank. As I sat trying to conjecture what place this might be, all of a sudden Indra came running back to me. ‘Srikanta,’ he said, ‘I have come back to say something particular. If anybody comes and asks you for fish, don’t give him any. Be very careful you don’t give any fish to anybody, even if you see somebody exactly like me. Mind this. If anyone asks for fish, say to him, “I’ll put

ashes into your mouth. You can take them yourself if you want them." But 'don't, for God's sake, give away fish with your own hand—even if he were exactly like me. Do you understand ?'

' But why ?'

' I'll tell you when I come back. But be careful !' He disappeared as quickly as he had come.

This time every hair on my body stood on end. Through every vein my blood suddenly ran cold, cold as melted ice. I was no child that I could not guess at what awful thing Indra was hinting. Many events have occurred in my life compared to which our little adventure was an insignificant affair. But I can truly say that language is powerless to describe the terror which surged through my soul when Indra left me. I all but lost consciousness through sheer fright. Every minute it seemed to me as if somebody was peering at me from beyond the high, sandy bank in front of me, and every time I looked sideways at him he seemed to thrust forward his head.

What an endless time Indra was taking to return !

At last I thought I heard human voices. I twisted my sacred thread a hundredfold round my thumb and sat with my head bent low, straining to catch the slightest sound. As the voices became clearer I realized that two or three men were coming towards me talking. One of them was Indra and the other two were up-country men. But before I saw their faces, I had a good look to see if they cast shadows in the moonlight ; for I had known the indisputable truth from my childhood that those *beings* cast no shadows.

Ah ! what a relief ! For they *had* shadows, though very faint ones : I wonder if any sight has brought more joy and satisfaction to anyone. The up-country men removed the fish from our canoe with extraordinary despatch and tied them up in a piece of gauze-like cloth. A jingling sound revealed to me what it was they pressed into Indra's hands.

Indra unloosed the canoe, but did not let it move down the stream. He began to punt it slowly along the bank of the river.

I said nothing, for my mind had risen against him in inexpressible bitterness and contempt. And this was the boy whom a moment ago I had wanted to embrace in sheer delight, at the mere sight of his pale shadow in the moonlight ! Yes, that is how man is constituted. At the slightest discovery of another's fault we forget in an instant everything we have known to his credit. But what had I seen ? Only this—he had not shown the least sign of hesitation in taking money from disreputable men. Until then it had never entered my mind that our nocturnal adventure might be regarded as a thieving expedition. In our boyhood it is the stealing of money that is synonymous with theft, not the stealing of other things. That was why all the glory and splendour of our adventure vanished at the mere sound of the jingling coin. If Indra had thrown away all the fish into the Ganges, if he had done any conceivable thing with them except this one thing of bartering them for money, I should have been the first to resent the suggestion that we were out on a thieving expedition. I have no doubt that in my boyish enthusiasm I should have wanted to knock down anyone who expressed so outrageous an opinion and should have felt completely

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justified in doing so. But this ! Was not this vile thing the deed of jail-convicts ?

‘ You didn’t get frightened, did you, Srikanta ? ’ asked Indra.

‘ No,’ I answered shortly.

‘ Do you know what you have done ? ’ asked Indra. ‘ Nobody else could have sat here alone as you have done, you know. You are the best friend I’ve got and I’ll never forget this. How would you like me to bring you with me every time I come out in future ? ’

I made no reply, but just then the light of the moon, released from the clouds, fell on his face and something that I saw in his features made me forget all my irritation and indignation in one sweep of reconciliatory emotion. I said to him, ‘ Indra, have you seen anything of that kind yourself ? ’

‘ What kind ? ’

‘ Well, those who come and ask for fish ? ’

‘ Why, no, I haven’t: I told you what I’ve heard from others.’

‘ But can you come here alone ? ’

Indra laughed. ‘ I do come alone.’

‘ Don’t you get afraid ? ’

‘ No, I don’t. I take the name of Rama, and then those people can never come to me.’ He paused for an instant and then continued, ‘ Do you think taking the name of Rama a simple thing ? If you pass near a snake with that name on your lips, you will be absolutely safe. All creatures, you will see, will make way for you and flee

from you in terror. But you mustn't be afraid. They will know if you really are afraid and if your courage is only a make-believe, because they can read your thoughts, you know.'

The sandy bank now began to be more gravelly. The current was not strong on this side of the river as it was on the other. It almost seemed as if it were flowing in the direction in which we were going. Indra changed his pole for the paddle and said, 'We shall have to go through that part which looks like a forest. I shall have to get down there. I won't be long ; I shall be back in a minute.'

'All right,' I said with reluctance, for I had no excuse left for stopping him. And, besides, Indra appeared to have implicit faith in my fearlessness. As for myself, however, I was far from feeling easy about the matter. The place looked dark like a real forest ; and, in spite of the reassuring account of the potency of Rama's name to which Indra had just treated me, I had no desire to put it to the test in that eerie solitude under the dark, gaunt branches of an old banyan tree, alone in the canoe. An uncontrollable inward tremor took possession of me. It was true that there was no more fish with us ; and so there was less chance of being pestered with requests for them ; but who could say that 'their' importunities were confined to begging for fish ? And memories of stories of people's necks' being twisted, of their warm blood's being sucked, and their flesh's being munched flitted across my brain.

Indra began to paddle hard, and our canoe advanced at a rapid pace. Before long we were confronted by a clump of *kasar* and wild casuarina trees. To our

right, submerged except for their tops, they appeared to be looking in silent wonder at the two adventurous human boys, and gravely shook their heads at it, as if in disapproval or warning; while on the high, grassy bank to our left stood more of their blood-relations in massed crowds, looking equally stupefied with amazement, equally deprecating and solemn. But our indomitable helmsman was so well fortified with the name of Rama that he looked neither to the right nor to the left. Owing to the lowness of the right bank, this part of the river had become like a lake, with two openings on the two opposite sides. I asked Indra how he would get up the bank as I could discover no path at the foot of which the dinghy could be tied.

‘There is a narrow path,’ he said, ‘buckle that bragan tree over there.’

For some time a peculiar bad smell had been assailing my nostrils. It became more intense as we advanced. A sudden gust of wind came charged with so formidable an odour that, unable to bear it, I had to press my *dhuti* against my nose. ‘Something must be rotting here, Indra.’

‘It’s a corpse,’ he replied coolly. ‘People are dying of cholera in hundreds. It’s not every one that can properly burn the dead; some leave the dead body after just putting a little fire into the mouth. Then dogs and jackals devour the flesh and it rots; this smell is from rotten flesh.’

‘Where do they leave their dead?’

'Just there—from that part to this—all this is the cremation-ground. They drop the body wherever is most convenient, take a bath over there under the banyan tree, and go home. Cheer up ! that's only jackals fighting. Well then, come and sit near me here.'

I was too frightened to speak ; I went sprawling on all fours and sank down heavily near him. 'What are you afraid of, Srikanta ?' he asked, putting out his hands to me. 'I have passed by this way on many a night. Do you think anybody would dare to come near you if you took the name of Rama ?'

His touch seemed to infuse some life into my body, 'For God's sake,' I said faintly, 'don't get down here—let us pass straight on.'

He touched me again on the shoulder as he said, 'No, Srikanta, I must go there now. I must give them this money ; they have been looking forward to it, and I haven't been able to come to them for the last three days.'

'But couldn't you do it to-morrow ?'

'No, don't ask me to. You come with me, but mind you don't speak of it to anyone.'

I assented vaguely and sat still as a statue, never once releasing my hold of him. My throat had dried up, and I had not the energy left to reach forward to the water or to make any other movement.

We were now passing under the shadow of trees, and I could see the place where we had to alight, as it had no trees overhead. It was lit up with the wan moonlight ; this was some consolation, in the condition of mind I was in. Just as the canoc was going to dash against the gravelly bank, Indra stepped up on the prow and jumped

down before a collision could take place. An exclamation of startled terror from him made me look down : the next instant, he from the bank below and I from the dinghy above, were both looking down on the same object.

Never since have I been face to face with untimely death wearing so piteous an aspect. It would be impossible for anyone to realize the full pathos of it, unless he saw it, as we saw it on that night. There in the depth of the midnight silence that was broken only by the howls of hungry jackals, wandering invisible behind the thick gloom of the shrubs and clumps of trees, by the flappings of the wings of vultures and other obscene birds on the branches aloft, and by the roar and moan of the ceaseless waters eddying past us, we stood without a word, looking on the most pitiful of objects. We saw a healthy-looking boy of fair complexion, aged six or seven years, his head lying on the bank and the rest of his body floating in the waters. Probably jackals had just been busy pulling him out of the water, and our sudden approach had made them retreat until we should depart. The boy could not have been dead more than three or four hours. The poor thing looked as if, worn out by the intolerable sufferings of cholera, he had at last fallen asleep on the lap of the mother Ganges ; and the mother was just laying her boy gently, very gently, on her bed.

When I looked at Indra I saw big tears running down his cheeks. 'Just stand aside a bit, Srikanta !' he said. 'I'll take the poor little fellow in our dinghy over to those casuarinas on the reef and put him into the water there.'

It is true that, at the sight of his tears, tears were starting out of my eyes too ; but his proposal to handle the thing was too much for me. It is no easy matter

to shed tears at another's misery or suffering, I will admit ; but it is quite a different and a much harder thing to go out of one's way and voluntarily to shoulder responsibilities like this. How many of our prejudices and fixed ideas are put to the test at such a time ! For one thing, being born in a highly sacred line of descent from the venerable Rishis, in the Hindu community, which, in point of purity and sanctity, easily takes the lead of all the communities on the face of the earth, I had been taught to regard the touch of the dead as a terrible defilement and abomination, forbidden by a hundred rules and injunctions of the *shastras*, reinforced by as many scriptural prohibitions and expiations. Add to that the fact that we did not know of what disease the boy had died, what his caste was, and who his parents were. How could we touch the corpse, not knowing these things, not to speak of our total ignorance as to whether before the dead boy was taken from his home, the necessary penances had been performed for him ? But as soon as with an inward shrinking I said to Indra, ' You do not know what his caste is—will you touch the corpse ? ' he put one arm under the neck and the other below the knee of the body and said as he lifted it up lightly, ' If I don't, the jackals will tear him to shreds and devour him. Poor thing ! there is still the smell of medicine on his lips.' And he put the corpse down on the plank on which I had just been lying. Giving the canoe a push, he jumped into it. ' Do you really think a dead body has any caste ? ' he asked.

' Why shouldn't it have ? ' I asked.

' Why, it's just a dead body. How can anything dead have caste ? This dinghy of ours—has it got any caste ?

Whatever may have been the tree out of which it was made, mango, jack, or any other, nobody would now call it mango or jack tree. Don't you see ?

Of course, I can now say that his instance was very childish indeed. But I know at the same time that his words contained a subtle kernel of truth hidden somewhere. Now and then he would utter such naked truths. And I have often wondered where this boy, who had learnt nothing from anyone and rather defied and transgressed the established customs and beliefs, could have got those profound truths. I believe now that I have got an answer to this question. There was not a speck of insincerity in Indra ; he could not conceal or give the lie to his motives in any action. Was it not possible that this innate veracity of nature, by virtue of some hidden law, could spontaneously draw the universal truths into his individual soul ? His simple, unsophisticated intelligence, by refusing all allegiance to what is known as the practical mind, could see unvarnished truth face to face. Is not such unconventionalized intelligence indeed the highest and clearest intelligence ? Looked at properly, the whole universe does not reveal a scrap of untruth in its constitution. What we call untruth is but the result of our faulty understanding and imperfect explanation. If you regard gold as brass or call it brass, you are no doubt guilty of falsehood ; but, for all that, what does it matter to gold or brass ? Your imperfect understanding cannot change the nature of either. If you hoard brass in your safe, that does not increase its value, nor can you depreciate the value of gold by flinging it contemptuously away as brass. Nobody is responsible for your mistakes but yourself, and nobody else is affected by them. So it is not strange that Indra, who had never harboured an untruth

in his heart in all his life, could, with his untainted intelligence, spontaneously reach out for and attain the true and the good in everything.

On coming to the reef Indra placed the dead body of the unknown boy with infinite tenderness on the water under the deep shadows of the half-submerged casuarinas. The night was then almost spent. Indra remained for a time bending low over the body as if he were straining to catch some sound, some voice. When at length he raised his face in the wan moonlight, it looked very pale.

‘Let us go now,’ I said.

‘Where shall we go?’ Indra asked absent-mindedly.

‘I thought you just said we were to go somewhere.’

‘No, not to-day.’

‘All right, then,’ I said in an access of relief, ‘that’s good: let us go home.’

In reply Indra fixed his eyes on my face and asked, ‘Do you know, Srikanta, what happens to men when they die?’

‘Why, no, I don’t,’ I said hurriedly. ‘Let’s get back home. They all go to heaven. Take me back to our house, Indra, in God’s name.’

Indra seemed hardly to hear what I said. ‘It isn’t everyone,’ he said, ‘that can go to heaven. Besides, they have all to stay here for some time. I tell you, Srikanta, when I was laying him on the water that little boy whispered clearly in Hindi, “Brother”.’

I was on the point of bursting into tears out of fright and I said in a trembling voice, ‘Don’t, please don’t

Srikanta

frighten me. 'I shall faint.' Indra said nothing, and did not even attempt to reassure me ; he took the paddle and, bringing the canoe slowly out of the grove, began to paddle it straight on. 'Srikanta,' he said presently in a low, grave voice, 'repeat the name of Rama to yourself : he has not left our boat ; he is sitting behind me.'

I remember that immediately after that I fell forwards on my face. I remember nothing else, except that when I opened my eyes, I saw that it was already light and that the canoe had been tethered to the bank. Indra was sitting near my feet and he said, 'You will have to walk this little distance, Srikanta : can you sit up ?'

IV

AFTER walking along the banks of the Ganges with steps weighed down by an overpowering fatigue, I arrived home with red eyes and a blanched and haggard face. My arrival caused a sensation. 'Here he is,' 'Here he is,' shouted everyone in a wild chorus : and at the greeting I felt as if my throbbing heart were going to stop.

Jatinda was about my age ; so it was he, naturally, who was most excited at my return. He suddenly came bounding towards me at a frantic speed, announcing my arrival with a deafening yell, 'Srikanta has come, Mejda. He has just come in', and, eagerly dragging me along, he made me stand on the doormat of the drawing-room.

Mejda was deep in his studies, just as he had been on the previous evening when the alarm of 'Tiger' was raised. He lifted his head and, after looking at me for an instant, resumed his reading without a word. His feelings must have been like those of a tiger that has secured its prey and that sits careless and nonchalant, not troubling even to look at it. It may well be doubted whether he had ever had an opportunity so pregnant with splendid possibilities of punishing a culprit.

Perfect silence reigned for a minute while I wondered miserably what form my punishment was to take, for punishment of some sort was. I knew, an inevitable sequel to my having spent the night away from home.

Then suddenly, 'Will you look up the almanac, Satish,' said a voice at the side-door, 'and see whether brinjals are prohibited or not?'¹ and my aunt, the mistress of the house, appeared. She stopped abruptly on seeing me. 'So you have come at last, you vagabond? And when were you pleased to arrive? Where under the sun have you been? Good gracious, what a jewel of a boy you are, to be sure! I couldn't get any sleep last night, worrying myself to death about you. Fancy his slinking away with that rascal Indra without saying a word! Heaven knows what kind of food he has had and where. Where have you been, you scamp? Dear me, what a black face he has got, and red eyes too! I shouldn't wonder if he has got fever. Come here: let me see—' and rattling off one question after another, she came forward and felt my forehead with her hand. Then she exclaimed, 'Just what I thought: it is quite hot. One ought to tie up such boys hand and foot and whip them all over with stinging nettles. I shan't have any peace of mind until I have turned you out of the house, vagabond that you are. Come,—come and have your sleep out, you wretched monkey.' She dragged me along, forgetting all about the brinjals.

'He cannot go now,' said Mejda with a rumble of thunder in his voice.

'And what will he do here? No, he cannot study. He will first have to take a little breakfast, and then have his sleep. Come along with me', and my aunt started again.

1. The Bengali almanac gives information and advice for each day of the year, including what articles of food are prohibited for particular days and seasons.

The prey was about to escape from Mejda's clutches. Forgetting himself, he roared at me threateningly, 'Take care : I tell you, you mustn't go, Srikanta.' Even my aunt was taken aback at this outburst. She turned and said the one word, 'Sate-e-e'. She was a woman of masterful personality, and everybody in the house was afraid of her. In a moment her glance had withered up our Mejda.

My aunt had no liking for scenes ; even when very angry she would never speak with unnecessary vehemence or loudness. 'Is that why he is standing here ?' she asked quietly. 'Well, I have heard, Satee, that you have a habit of beating the boys in season and out of season. If I ever hear of your doing it again, I will just get you tied up to this post and beaten by my servants, do you hear ? Impudent donkey that you are, you have been failing at every examination year after year and you must needs bully these little boys to death. Whether they do their lessons or not, don't you ask them a single question again, do you hear ?' Taking me with her she went out through the door by which she had come. Mejda sat with a very black face. He knew that no one in the house had the courage to go against his mother's orders.

She took me to her own room and, giving me a change of clothes, made me eat a hearty breakfast of hot *jilabis*. She then bade me lie down and, with the remark that nothing short of my death would bring comfort to her old bones, she went out and chained the door from the outside.

About five minutes later the chain was noiselessly unloosed and Chhotda came in panting and flung himself

flat on my bed. Struggling with the excess of joy that had evidently sent him to me, he said after a moment in which he seemed to take breath, 'Do you know what order Mother has given Mejda? He is not to interfere with us in any way. You and I and Jatin will have a room. Bar-dat¹ will look after our studies. We won't care a rap for him now': and, putting his thumbs together, he moved them in tune with his violent excitement.

Jatinda too was not slow in making his appearance. He was evidently overcome with joy at his own cleverness. It was he who had given the glad tidings to Chhotda and had sent him to me. At first he let himself have his pent-up laugh out. Then, smiting his chest with his hand repeatedly, 'I, I,' he declared, 'it's I who am responsible for this. Do you realise it? Would mother have given the order if I had not taken Srikanta to Mejda? I tell you, Chhotda, I must have that clock-work top of yours.'

'Right you are,' said Chhotda in an access of generous zeal: 'you will find it in my desk.' Chhotda would not have given this top away for worlds an hour before, but in the joy of recovering those rights on which Mejda had wantonly encroached he did not hesitate to part with the thing which I know he prized no less than his life. Indeed the tyranny of Mejda had known no bounds. On Sundays we had to walk a mile in the blazing heat of noon to summon his friends to a game of cards. During the summer vacation one of us had to fan him while he took his daily siesta. On winter nights, when he sat reading his books with his hands and legs withdrawn, tortoise-fashion, under the quilt, we had to turn over the

1. Eldest brother.

leaves of his book. And yet we could not protest or disobey, nor could we complain to any one else. If he heard of such a thing he would forthwith issue orders 'Keshab, bring your geography : I will examine you in your old lessons. Jatin, go and break a good casuarina branch and bring it to me.' That meant that castigation was inevitable. It is therefore little wonder that our jubilation on this occasion exceeded reasonable limits.

But great as was our joy, we had to curb these manifestations of our feelings, for it was near school-time. As I had fever I was exempt from the necessity of going to school, and, as a matter of fact, my fever kept me in bed for seven or eight days.

I do not remember how many days it was after this before I went back to school, and how many days later I met Indra again. But some weeks must have passed. It was a Saturday and we had returned early from school. The water in the Ganges had begun to run low. I was sitting on the bank of a ditch near the river, a fishing-rod in hand, trying to catch fish; there were several other anglers sitting near. Suddenly I caught a glimpse of one who sat behind a reed-bush and who was evidently bringing up fish after fish. I could not see him plainly, but could see his fishing. I was dissatisfied with my position and decided to go and sit near the successful angler. When I got up, rod in hand, and walked behind him, he said quietly, 'Sit down here beside me. Are you all right, Srikanta?' His voice sent a tingling spasm through my heart. I had not yet seen his face, but knew that it was Indra. It was as if an electric current had passed through my body, and in an instant all the blood from my veins, quickened by some

Srikanta

vital impulse, began to beat violently in my heart. I could not utter a word. He whose memory I had been carrying like a hidden treasure, whose companionship I longed for with a passionate yearning, whom nevertheless I secretly dreaded to meet, he had flashed unexpectedly on my eyes and now asked me to sit near him. I went, but I could not find a word to say.

‘Didn’t you get a terrible drubbing, Srikanta,’ asked Indra, ‘after you returned the other day? I really shouldn’t have taken you out: I feel very sorry for it now.’

‘No,’ I replied, shaking my head, ‘I didn’t get any drubbing at all.’

‘You didn’t?’ said Indra, evidently pleased. ‘Look here, Srikanta, when you left me I prayed—I prayed to Mother Kali—that nobody should beat you. Kali is a great goddess: if you pray to her, nobody will ever be able to beat you.’ And he put down his rod and joining his palms together touched his forehead with them, as a grateful obeisance to the invisible goddess. Putting a bait on the hook and flinging it into the water, he said, ‘I never thought that you would get ill; if I had, I wouldn’t have let the illness come.’

‘What would you have done?’ I asked solemnly.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘I would have just plucked a red *jaba* flower and placed it on Kali’s feet. Whatever you pray for when you offer a flower, you get. Everyone knows that. Don’t you?’

‘Aren’t you ever taken ill?’

‘I taken ill?’ Indra repeated in surprise. ‘No, I’m never taken ill—never.’ He seemed fired by a sudden enthusiasm and said, ‘Look here, Srikanta, I’ll teach you something. If you take the names of gods and goddesses morning and evening, they will come and stand before you, and you will see them plainly; and then you will never get ill. No one will be able to touch a hair of your head. You will find that it is so. You can go wherever you like, do what you like, just as I do; and nothing will ever happen to you. Do you understand?’

I nodded and said, ‘Yes.’ As I threw my baited hook into the water, I asked in a low voice, ‘Whom do you take there now?’

‘Where?’

‘Over there, to catch fish?’

Indra pulled in his line and, putting his rod gently beside him, said, ‘I don’t go there any more.’

I was much surprised and asked, ‘Haven’t you been there again a single day?’

‘No, not once.’ Indra raised his head and tried to say something, but a sudden blush suffused his face and he lowered his head again. He plucked a reed and drawing it to and fro over the water said, ‘Srikanta.’

‘Yes?’

‘Have you—have you got—any money?’

‘How much?’

‘How much? Say, five rupees?’

‘Yes, I have. Will you take it?’ I looked at his face in joyful expectation. I had just the amount he

wanted, and I could not imagine a better use for the money than its being a help to Indra. But far from appearing pleased, Indra looked more embarrassed than ever. After a moment's silence he said, 'I shall not be able to return your money, Srikanta.'

'I shall not want it back,' I said, looking him proudly in the face.

He again sat silent for a minute or two, his head bent low ; then he said slowly, 'I don't want it for myself. Somebody wants money, you know. They are very poor ; they don't get enough to eat. Will you go there with me ?'

All at once the thought of that night of adventure came to my mind. 'You mean those to whom you wanted to give money on that night ?'

'Yes,' said Indra, nodding absent-mindedly. 'It isn't as if I can't get money for them, but Didi¹ won't accept anything from me. You will have to go, Srikanta ; otherwise she won't take the money. She will think I have stolen it from my mother's safe. Will you go, Srikanta ?'

'Is she your real sister ?'

Indra smiled and said, 'No, but I call her sister. You will go there ?' Seeing me silent, he added, 'There's nothing to be afraid of if we go by day, you know. To-morrow is Sunday ; after your dinner you wait for me here, and I will take you and bring you back in no time. Won't you go ?' And so wistfully did he look

1. Elder sister.

at me, holding me by the hand, that I did not have the heart to say 'No'. I agreed to go with him and then went home.

True, I had given my word to go, but I could not but dread the adventure to which I had committed myself. Throughout the day I remained in low spirits, and at night a sense of profound uneasiness mingled in my dreams and in my sleeping consciousness. In the early morning my first thought was that it would be a bad thing for me to go where I had promised to go. In case the matter became known, the punishment I should render myself liable to would probably be such as not even Chhotda could devise for Mejda. At length our dinner was over, and, taking my five rupees with me, I quietly slipped out of the house. Several times on my way the thought occurred to me, 'Better not go at all. What if I do not keep my promise?' but when I arrived at my destination and saw Indra sitting expectant in his little canoe in the thicket of reeds, he greeted me with such a smile that it was impossible for me to propose that our projected trip should be abandoned. I climbed down into the canoe in silence. Indra immediately unloosed it and we set out.

The day was not far advanced when, after tying our canoe to the roots of the banyan beside the narrow landing-place, we made our way towards the cremation-ground. After going a few steps we could see the suggestion of a foot-path through the jungle on our right. Indra struck out by this path, and after about ten minutes a hut became visible. As we came near, we saw that the entrance was barred by a gate. Indra carefully unloosed the knot of string with which the

gate was held in position, and, after going in and drawing me inside, closed the gate, tying the knot as before. Never in my life had I seen such a human habitation. The jungle was thick all around the hut and overhead a huge tamarind and a *pakur* tree darkened the yard still more. On seeing us enter, a flock of chickens and hens screamed and two goats that had been kept tied on one side of the yard bleated together. And just in front of us I saw, great heavens ! an immense python lying with its fearful coils spread all over the place. In half an instant I was scrambling up the fence, startling the hens still more by my exclamations of alarm. Indra burst out laughing, and cried, 'Oh, that's a good fellow; he doesn't mind you in the least. His name is Rahim.' He went near the creature and, lifting him by the middle, moved him to one side of the yard. When I got down from the fence, I saw, on looking to the right, a tall, thin man sitting on a number of broken mats and tattered mattresses in the verandah of the hut ; he was panting after a violent fit of coughing. His long, matted hair was coiled on his head, and round his neck were a number of necklaces of beads and dried nuts. His coat and cloth were very dirty and dyed a dull yellow. As his long beard was tied with a piece of cloth to his matted hair, I did not at first recognise him, but, on coming near, I found him to be a snake-charmer well known to me. Five or six months before I had seen him almost everywhere, and he had even given one or two exhibitions of snake-charming at our own house. Indra addressed him as Shahji ; he pointed to a seat for me and, raising his hand, indicated to Indra an earthen pipe and other materials for smoking *ganja*.¹ Without saying a word Indra

1. *Ganja*: Indian hemp, a strong intoxicant.

set about carrying out Shahji's silent directions. When the pipe had been charged and lighted, Shahji, in spite of his coughing and gasping, began to pull at it for all he was worth, and when he had finished he closed his mouth and nostrils with his left hand as if to prevent even the tiniest speck of smoke from escaping, and with a vigorous nod of his head said to Indra, transferring the pipe to him, 'Smoke.'

Indra did not smoke. He slowly put down the pipe on the floor and said, 'No.' Highly surprised at this, Shahji asked for the reason, but immediately, without waiting for a reply, took the pipe back. When, by continual puffs, he had entirely burnt out its contents, he put it upside down on the floor. After this Indra and he began to talk in low voices. Much of the conversation I could not hear, and much of what I heard I could not understand. But I noticed that though Shahji talked in Hindi, Indra spoke nothing but Bengali.

Gradually passion began to animate Shahji's voice, and all at once he began to rave like a furious maniac. I did not know who was the object of his filthy and vulgar abuse. After this outburst Shahji sat reclining against the wall, and in a minute or two he was fast asleep, his head bent down on his chest. After Indra and I had sat in silence for some time, I asked him with some impatience, 'Aren't you going? It is getting late.'

'Going where, Srikanta?'

'Won't you go to give the money to Didi?'

'Why, I am waiting for her arrival. This is her home.'

‘This ! Your Didi’s home ! But these people are snake-charmer Musalmans.’

Indra was about to say something, but suddenly stopped short : his eyes, as he looked at me, seemed dim with pain. At length he said, ‘Some day I will tell you everything. Would you like to see me make a snake dance ?’

Surprised at his words, I said, ‘You make a snake dance ? Won’t it bite you ?’

Indra went inside the room and brought out a small, cane box and a snake-charmer’s bagpipe. The cane box he placed before him on the verandah, and, having unloosed its lid, played on the bagpipe. Petrified with fear, I shouted, ‘Don’t, please don’t open the lid. There may be a cobra inside.’ Indra made no reply, but, playing on the bagpipe and waving his head to and fro, he opened the lid of the box. In the twinkling of an eye an enormous cobra raised itself from the box. Spreading its hood, it stood up a foot and a half high. With a great sweep it struck savagely at the lid which was still in Indra’s hand, and then jumped out of the box.

‘Great God !’ cried Indra in utter consternation as he leaped down from the verandah into the yard. I clambered up the fence again, while the enraged snake with another vicious bite at the bagpipe entered the room at lightning speed. Indra was livid with fright. ‘This is a wild one,’ he said, ‘not the one I usually play to.’

I was on the verge of tears, overcome by fear, disgust, and anger. ‘What did you do it for ?’ I asked. ‘Supposing he comes out again and bites Shahji ?’

Indra felt extremely ashamed. 'I'd better close the door,' he said. 'But then he may be hiding just behind it.'

'If he is,' I said, 'he is sure to come out and bite Shahji.'

Indra looked helplessly this way and that ; then he said, 'It will serve him right ! He keeps wild snakes in his house and he hasn't got the sense to take any precautions, *ganja*-smoking idiot that he is. Hullo, here is Didi. Don't come nearer, Didi, please don't. Stay where you are.'

Turning my head I saw Indra's Didi. There is an expression, 'fire under the cover of ashes': that was my first thought as I saw her. She looked like some one who had just risen from her seat of penance after having been engaged in age-long austerities. Under her left arm was a bundle of dry twigs and in her right hand was a basket, shaped like a flower-basket, with some vegetable in it. Her dress was like that of an up-country Musalman, dyed orange-brown, but not dirty like Shahji's. She wore a set of bangles made of lac and between the partings of her dark hair was a vermilion mark, the sign of a married Hindu woman. 'What is it ?' she asked, putting down her bundle of twigs as she began to unloose the latch of the gate. 'Don't open it, I entreat you,' said Indra greatly agitated. 'A big snake has got into the room.'

Didi looked at me ; she seemed to be thinking something over. Then, with a smile, she said, in clear Bengali, 'Oh, is that it ? A snake entering a snake-charmer's house—isn't that a wonder, Srikanta ?'

I still gazed at her in silence, and wondered that she already knew my name : Indranath, I suppose, had told her. 'But how did the snake enter, Indranath?' she asked. 'He jumped out of the box,' Indra explained, 'and went inside : it is a wild one.'

'Is he asleep?' she asked, pointing to Shahji. 'Yes,' said Indra angrily, 'he has smoked his fill of *ganju* and is now sleeping like a log. You couldn't wake him if you shouted yourself hoarse at his ear.' Didi again smiled slightly, and said, 'And taking advantage of the opportunity you wanted to show Srikanta a snake-dance, didn't you? Well, never mind, I'll go and catch him.'

'No, please don't : he will kill you. Make Shahji get up. I won't let you go.' And Indra spread out his arms before her, to prevent Didi's going into the house. She seemed to feel the depth of affection that rang in his anxious voice : for a brief moment I saw a glistening softness in her eyes, but she laughed as she said, 'You silly, mad boy, your Didi is not so fortunate ; he won't hurt me. Just watch me catch him.' She took down a kerosene lamp from the bamboo loft and, having lit it, entered the room. A minute later she returned holding the snake in her hand, and, thrusting it into the box, closed the lid. Indra touched the ground near her feet with his forehead, and, taking the dust from beneath her feet, said, 'Oh, Didi, how I wish you were really my own sister.' She touched his chin with her hand, and, as she kissed the tips of her fingers,¹ she turned her face a little, perhaps to wipe her eyes unseen.

1. A form of affectionate benediction used by elders towards their juniors.

V

WHILE Indra was relating his story I saw Didi shudder two or three times. She looked at him in silence for a while and then said, with a voice full of affectionate remonstrance, 'Dear, you mustn't do such a thing again. You ought not to play with these dangerous creatures : it was lucky that he only bit the lid in your hand ; otherwise just imagine what a terrible thing might have happened.'

'I'm not so big a fool as that, Didi,' said Indra laughing, as he hastened to show a piece of dry root tied to a string which was wound round his waist. 'Haven't I provided against danger ? If I hadn't had this, do you think he would have spared me ? But you don't know what trouble I had to get this from Shahji. No snake dares to bite you, you know, when you've got this about you ; and even if it had bitten me, what then ? I would have wakened Shahji and put his poison-stone on the bite. How long do you think, Didi, would that stone take to suck out all the poison ? Half an hour, a whole hour, or less ?'

Didi sat silent as before. 'You must give me one of those stones to-day, Didi,' continued Indra, warming up. 'You've got two or three, and I have been asking you for one such a long time.' He did not wait for a reply, but immediately added in an aggrieved tone. 'I do everything that you tell me to do ; and you always put me off to to-morrow or the day after to-morrow. If you don't

want to give it, why do you make promises? I won't come here again—and I don't want to have anything to do with you.'

Though Indra did not notice it, I could distinctly see that Didi's face became dark with a great pain and shame. But the next instant she managed to bring the semblance of a smile to her thin, ascetic lips, as she said, 'So *that's* why you come to your Didi's house, Indra—to learn spells and incantations and to get the poison-stone : is that it?'

'Yes, that's just it,' said Indra without the least hesitation. He sent a sidelong glance towards the sleeping Shahji, and added, 'But he is always putting me off : "This is not an auspicious day", he says, "That is not an auspicious day", "The other day is not auspicious", and so on. It's ages since he taught me the *mantra*¹ for "passing the hand";² ever since then he has positively refused to teach me anything more. But I have seen to-day, Didi, that you too know everything, and I am not going to humour him any more ; I'll get everything I want from you.' He looked at me and, in a voice hushed with awe and reverence, said, 'Shahji may be a *ganja*-smoker, Srikanta, but he is such a magician that he can bring a three days' corpse back to life. Can you, too, restore a dead man to life, Didi?'

Didi burst out into a merry laugh, clear and infinitely sweet : seldom have I heard anything so beautiful. But,

1. Incantation.

2. A feat by which conjurers claim that they can trace a snake by following the direction that their palms irresistibly take under the spell of incantation.

like the flash of lightning in a cloudy sky, it died out as suddenly as it came.

Indra seemed to regard Didi's laughter as an encouragement and he said smilingly, 'I know that you know everything. Teach me every one of the things you have learnt, and I will remain your slave for the rest of my life. How many dead bodies have you brought to life, Didi ?'

'But I tell you I don't know how to bring the dead back to life, Indranath.'

'Hasn't Shahji taught you that *mantra*, Didi? But you must have learnt from him how to "pass the cowrie-shells" ?'

'Oh, no,' said Didi; 'I don't even know what that is.'

Indra evidently did not believe it. 'Of course you don't,' he said sarcastically. 'Why not tell me plainly that you won't teach me ?' Then, turning towards me, he asked 'Have you ever seen cowrie-shells being passed. Srikanta ? Two shells, under the spell of *mantras*, will fly and find where the snake is ; and then they will stick to his hood with the grip of a vice. Even if the snake were the distance of a day's journey away, they would drag him all the way to your feet. Such is the power of spells. But, Didi, you must know the art of "binding the house and binding the body" and "magnetizing dust" and so forth ? If you don't, how could you catch that snake as you did?' and he turned a questioning face towards Didi.

Didi sat in silence for some time, looking down, lost in thought. When she raised her face she said slowly, 'Indra, your Didi does not possess the least bit of all that knowledge. If you are willing to believe why I don't, I will tell you everything to-day and get rid of the burden of my secret. Will you believe all that I will tell you?' Her last words were heavy with pent-up emotion.

I had scarcely spoken a word all this time, but now I did not hesitate to say with emphasis, 'I will believe everything you say, Didi. Yes, everything. I won't disbelieve a single word.'

She looked at me with a smile and said, 'Of course you will, my dear : aren't you sons of gentlemen? Only low people are suspicious of what strangers say.' She looked at me again and smiled rather sadly.

The dim gloom of the evening had given place to moonlight, and through the chinks among the thick leaves and branches of trees the rays of a pale moon filtered down into the thick darkness below. After a few moments' silence Didi suddenly said, 'Indranath, I had thought of telling you my whole story to-day, but I realize that the time has not yet come. Only believe me when I say that everything about us is a fraud. Do not follow Shahji about, deluded by a vain hope. We know nothing of *mantras*, nor can we revive the dead, nor catch snakes by passing the cowrie-shell. We do not know whether others can, but we ourselves have no such power.'

Though I could not exactly tell why, I believed every word she said, in spite of my short acquaintance with her. But Indra remained incredulous. 'Well,' he said angrily, 'if you don't know any better than any others, how could you catch the snake?'

'That was merely a trick of the hand, Indra,' she said : 'there was no *mantra* in it. I know nothing of snake-charming.'

'If you don't,' he asked bluntly, 'why did you deceive me, both of you, and trick me of so much money ?'

Didi could not give any reply at once. She seemed to me to be making an effort to collect herself. 'Cheats and humbugs !' cried Indra harshly. 'All right, I'll teach you a lesson, I will.'

A kerosene lamp was burning quite near : by its light I could see Didi's face became white in an instant with a death-like pallor. 'We are only snake-charmers, dear,' she said, timid and hesitant ; 'deceit is our daily trade—'

'I will teach you your daily trade. Come, Srikanta, we shouldn't have touched the shadow of these rascally swindlers. Knaves and humbugs !' Indra seized my hand with sudden force and started up dragging me along with him. I cannot blame Indra, for he had built up many hopes and many ambitious castles in the air, which he now suddenly found dashed to the ground in the twinkling of an eye. But when I looked at Didi, I could not turn my eyes away. Freeing myself with an effort from Indra's grip, I went and placed my five rupees before her, saying, 'I brought this for you : won't you take it ?'

Indra pounced upon the rupees, saying 'Won't she ! You don't know, Srikanta, how much money these people have cheated me of by their mummary and their fibs. If they die of want and starvation, that's just what I should like to see them do.'

'No, Indra, give me the money,' I said, pressing his hands : 'I brought it expressly for Didi—'

‘Didi be damned,’ he cried and dragged me to the hedge.

All this row woke up Shahji. ‘What’s that ? What’s that ?’ he asked, sitting up.

‘Rogue and rascal,’ cried Indra, leaving hold of me and stepping up to Shahji. ‘I’ll whip the hide off your back, you swine. “What’s that?” indeed! As if he didn’t know anything. . . He goes about saying that he can revive corpses by *mantras*. By Jove, I’ll revive you as you deserve, next time I see you’, and he made such a savage gesture that even Shahji was visibly startled.

His brain had evidently not got clear of the *ganja* fumes ; coming on top of that, this strange and unexpected situation was too much for it to grapple with, and he sat bemused and at his wit’s end, with an idiotic stare.

When Indra had dragged me outside the enclosure we heard from behind us Shahji shouting in clear Bengali, ‘Tell me, Indranath, what is all this ?’ It was the first time that I had heard him speak Bengali.

Indra turned back, and said, ‘You pretend you don’t know anything. Will you tell me why you have tricked me so long and taken so much money for nothing ?’

‘Who says for nothing ?’ he asked.

Indra pointed at Didi who was sitting silent with bent head, and said, ‘She has told us that you know nothing of the black art. What you do know is to fool other people and cheat them of their money. That appears to be your trade, swindling liars !’

Shahji’s eyes blazed with fury. I had not known till then what a terrible man he was, but the sight of those

blazing eyes filled me with terror. He stood up, tying up his dishevelled hair, and approaching Didi asked, 'Have you really told them that ?'

Didi sat silent, her head bent down as before. Indra nudged me, saying, 'Let's go home : it's getting late.' True, it was getting late, but I could not move a single step. Yet Indra went on, pulling me along. After we had gone a few steps we heard the voice of Shahji again, 'Why did you tell them ?'

I did not hear Didi's reply, but by the time we had gone a little further, a sudden, piercing scream rent the darkness. In the twinkling of an eye Indra followed the sound and disappeared out of sight. But fate had willed differently for me. I stumbled as I turned and fell headlong into a big bush of *shiakul* plant which stood in my path. Its thorns gashed and tore me all over, and some minutes passed before I could extricate myself from them, for by the time I released one part of my dress, another part had got entangled, and when that had been freed, a third part was caught up in the thorns. When at last I reached the front yard of the cottage I saw Didi lying in a faint at one end of it, and at the other end a battle royal proceeding between the master and the disciple. Beside them was lying a sharp, pointed lance. Shahji was a very powerful man. But he could not have known that Indra was far more powerful than he ; if he had, he would not have wilfully run so grave a risk. In a few moments Indra had thrown him on his back and sat on his chest, squeezing his neck so hard that, had I not intervened, the life of Shahji the snake-charmer would soon have been finished.

After great efforts I separated the two, and then the sight of Indra's condition made me burst into tears of dismay. In the deepening dusk I had not at first noticed that all his clothes were terribly blood-stained. 'He hit me with that lance with which he kills snakes,' Indra gasped, 'confounded ruffian that he is. See !' and pulling up his sleeves he showed me a wound in his arm, two or three inches wide, bleeding profusely.

'Don't cry,' he said to me. 'Tie this part as hard as you can.' And then to Shahji, 'Take care, you! Sit there just as you are! If you get up I'll put my foot on your neck and tear out your tongue, you dastardly swine! Now, Srikanta, tie up this part, quick!' and he tore up a part of the *dhoti* he was wearing. I began dressing the wound with trembling hands, while Shahji looked on in silence with the glare of a venomous snake about to meet its death.

'No, I can't trust you,' said Indra. 'You might commit murder : I'll tie up your hands.' And with Shahji's ochre-coloured turban-cloth he tied his hands together. Shahji did not protest, resist, or speak a word.

Indra put aside the stick with which Shahji had knocked Didi senseless and said, 'What an ungrateful wretch this villain is! How much of Father's money have I not stolen for him and how much more would I not have stolen, had not Didi forbidden me. Yet how readily he flung that lance at me to-day ! Srikanta, keep your eye on him : see that he doesn't get up. I'll dash some water on Didi's face.'

After he had thrown some water on her face he said, as he fanned her, 'From the day she told me, "We would have taken it had it been your money, but it would be a

great sin to take it from you", no one knows how much beating she has had to bear at his hands. And yet she has been feeding him and supplying him with money for his *ganja* by collecting fuel, and making cow-dung cakes and selling them ; and still he is never satisfied. I shall not be happy until I make him over to the police. If I don't he will kill her. He might easily commit murder.'

Shahji shivered at these words, raised his face for an instant, and then looked down again. I can still remember the deep shadow of fear that I saw cross his face.

When Didi opened her eyes and sat up, it was about midnight. She took almost an hour to come fully to herself. Then, when I had told her the whole story of the evening, she went up slowly to Shahji, untied his hands, and said, 'Now go ; go to bed.'

After he had gone, she called Indra to her and placing his right hand on her head, said, 'Swear, Indra, my brother, by my head, that never again will you set foot in this house. Whatever may happen to us, do not have anything to do with us in future.'

Indra remained speechless with surprise for a few moments. Then he suddenly blazed out indignantly, 'Indeed, and it's nothing to you that he attempted to murder me ? You turn sullen and angry because I kept him tied up. That's all the thanks that I get from you ! Ungrateful wretches, both of you ! Come, Srikanta, we won't stay any more.'

Didi sat silent, without protesting against a single charge of his. Why she did not, I came to understand later, though I could not understand it then. I put down the five rupees near a post, unseen and in silence, and followed

Indra. As he went out of the court-yard, Indra shouted, 'What decency or religion could you expect of a Hindu woman who has left her home to live with a Musalman? You can go to the devil ; I won't have anything more to do with you. I have washed my hands of your affairs once for all, rascally cheats that you are!' and he hurried swiftly across the stretch of jungle.

When we had taken our seats in the canoe, Indra began to row in silence, and at times he wiped his eyes with his hands. I could see that he was crying, and asked no questions.

We returned past the cremation-ground and were following the way we had gone on the first day, but no fear entered my mind this time. I was so bewildered and distracted that the thought of how I should enter our house at that hour of the night or what fate awaited me later never occurred to me.

When we arrived at the landing-*ghat* the night was almost over. As I got down from the canoe, Indra said, 'Go home, Srikanta ; you are unlucky. Whenever I have brought you with me some beastly trouble or other has arisen. I won't ever call you to help me in anything again: and don't you ever come near me again. Go!' He pushed the canoe back into the deep water and disappeared out of sight. Surprised and pained, I stood in silence on the deserted bank of the river.

VI

WHEN, without any fault on my part, I found myself forsaken by Indra, alone on the bank of the Ganges in that still, solemn night, I could not restrain my tears. So this was all the value he attached to my affection for him ! I had followed him, unmindful of the strict restraints of our house : but what was that to him ? He had not hesitated to call me unlucky and useless, and certainly when he left me he thought it a good riddance.

I cannot tell how much Indra's cruel indifference pained me. After this he did not seek me nor I him. If I met him accidentally in the streets, I would look away from him, pretending that I had not seen him. This pretence of mine was as gall and wormwood to me : but how much did it affect him ? He was a leading spirit in our boys' world ; he was captain of the football and cricket teams, the best gymnast in the gymnasium. What a number of disciples, admirers, and followers he had ! And what was I ? A mere nobody in comparison. But why had he called me his friend for a short time and then shut me out of his acquaintance, in the chilly world outside ? Finding myself shut out, I took no special pains to get in again. How well I remember when our common friends would tell wonderful stories about Indra and I would hear them in perfect silence. Not by a single word did I ever hint that he knew me or that I knew anything about him. How well I had learned, even at

that early age, the tragic fatality which ends friendship between the great and the little in this world.

Three or four months passed. We had given each other up : and whatever may have been the pangs and sorrows on each side, neither of us made any enquiry about the other. It was at this time, in the midst of the *Kali-puja* holidays, that a stage was erected at the Dutts' house for the local amateur theatricals. The play was going to be *Meghnad-badli* ('The Killing of Meghnad'). I had often seen rustic operas performed, but had not seen many theatrical plays. This and the fact that, as a great favour, I had been allowed to lend a hand in preparing the stage, roused my enthusiasm to such a pitch that I gave up all my usual occupations and was indefatigable in my task. Not only was I favoured by being allowed to help, but he who was to take the part of Rama, had himself once told me to hold a rope. Accordingly I had high hopes that at night when other boys, peering through the holes of the canvas-walls of the green-room, would be repulsed at the point of sticks, the special favour of Rama would mean different treatment for me ; perhaps he would single me out of the rabble and call me in once or twice. But alas for all my arduous labours throughout the day, my recompense, after the lamps were lit, was nil. Hour after hour I stood near the green-room door : Ramachandra passed and re-passed me several times, but far from asking why I stood there, he never even gave me a nod of recognition. Ungrateful Rama ! Had he no further need of a rope-holder ?

After ten o'clock, when the first bell rang to signal the beginning of the play, I joined the audience, extremely pained and disgusted with the whole affair, and occupied

one of the seats in front. But a few minutes sufficed to wipe off all my sorrow and disgust. What a play it was ! I have seen many plays in life, but never another like that. Meghnad himself was a colossal affair : his body was about seven feet in height, his circumference at least six feet. People said that after his death his body would have to be taken to the burning-place in a bullock-cart : he could not be carried on human shoulders. Though I do not remember all the details of the play, I can remember this, that the heroism Meghnad displayed that night could not be matched by Haran Palsain, of our village, even in the part of *Bhima*, carrying a branch of *sajina* tree on his shoulder, while he gnashed his teeth with all his might.

The curtain rose. A character was on the stage ; I believe it was Lakshman. He was declaiming a speech when all on a sudden Meghnad, at one bound, appeared before him. The whole stage creaked and groaned and trembled : five or six lamps which formed the footlights were overturned and extinguished. The gilt belt which confined Meghnad's waist split with a loud snap. A great sensation followed. Some of the audience eagerly advised Meghnad to sit down on the stage, while others demanded that the curtain should be dropped. But our brave Meghnad was nothing daunted. He threw his bow down, and, holding up his trousers with his left hand, began to fight with a single arrow in his right.

What bravery ! What splendid heroism ! Many have seen fights, but who has ever seen anyone, without a bow and with a left hand *hors de combat*, fight with his right hand alone, using a single arrow, ruthless and indomitable ? For thus indeed did Meghnad conquer his foe, who was forced to save his skin by headlong flight.

While I was lost in appreciation of this splendid performance and in admiration for the unusual mode of warfare, I felt the pressure of a finger on my back. Turning my head I saw it was Indra. 'Come, Srikanta,' he whispered, 'Didi wants to see you.' In an instant I sat bolt upright and asked, 'Where is she?'

'Come out of this : I'll tell you.' When I had gone out with him, he simply said, 'Come along with me,' and began to walk on.

When we reached the *ghat*, I saw that Indra's boat was ready ; both of us got in in silence, and we started.

Once more we proceeded by the old water-way in the darkness, and then followed the jungle path till we came to Shahji's hut. By that time night was far spent.

Didi was sitting beside a kerosene lamp, Shahji's head lying on her lap. Near her feet was stretched a huge, dead cobra.

Briefly and in a low voice she told us what had happened. A reward had been offered that day for catching a snake in somebody's house. Shahji had caught the snake and had returned home just before dusk, drunk on the reward he had got. He had insisted, in spite of Didi's remonstrances, on playing for one of the snakes to dance. As he put the snake into the *handi* he had placed his face near its mouth, intending to bid it an affectionate good-night, and the brute had bitten him in the neck.

Didi wiped her eyes with the end of her *sari*. 'Srikanta,' she said, 'he understood at once that his hours were numbered. He trod on the head of the snake with his

1. Round, earthen pot.

heel, crying, "Come, let us both die together!" and then flung himself on the ground with the snake stretched out beside him. There they both lay dead at my feet.' With the tenderest care she lifted the cloth that covered Shahji's face, and, touching his lips, already blue, with hers, she said with deep emotion, 'It is well, Indranath! I do not lay the slightest blame on God.'

We two stood speechless. No one who felt the heart-rending anguish, the baffled longing and prayer, that were expressed in that voice, could forget it again.

'You are only children,' she said after a pause, 'but I have no one except you two. So I ask you to do what you can for him before you go.'

She pointed to the jungle to the south of the hut. 'There is a small space, Indranath, over there. I have often thought that, if I were to die here, I should like to lie in that place. In the morning you will lay him there: he has suffered many sorrows in his life; now he will be at rest and find peace.'

'Didi, ought we to bury Shahji?' asked Indra.

'Of course, my dear,' she answered; 'he was a Musalman, you know.'

Indra put another question, 'Didi, are you too a Musalman?'

'Yes,' she said, 'of course I am a Musalman.'

I could see that the reply hurt Indra a little. He had not expected it. He had really loved Didi and had harboured a secret hope in his heart that she was one of ourselves, a Hindu. But I could not believe her: even

after her own avowal I could not think that she was not a Hindu's daughter.

As soon as the night was over, Indra dug a grave in the place Didi had indicated and we three took Shahji's body there and buried it. It was a place just above the Ganges, formed by the breaking of the gravelly bank and well fitted for a grave. The river flowed past, some forty feet below, and overhead was a screen of branches and wild creepers, a fit place in which to conceal one's treasure. With heavy hearts we three sat side by side. A fourth person had lain down to sleep for ever, his silent heart so near our beating hearts, in the bosom of the earth. The sun had not yet arisen ; below flowed the slow-moving Ganges, and its soft murmurs came wafted up to our ears : above us and on all sides the forest-birds sang their morning songs.

Suddenly Didi threw herself down on the grave and cried aloud in a broken voice, ' Mother Ganges, give me too a place at thy feet ! I have no other place to call my own ! ' How true this was I did not understand so well then as I did two days later. Indra glanced at me, and then, going up to the sorrow-stricken woman, he took her head on his lap and said, in a voice of infinite grief, ' Didi, come to my home. My mother is alive, and she will take you to her heart and not keep you at a distance. You do not know how kind she is. Come to her : that is all I ask, Didi. You are a Hindu's daughter, Didi, and not a Musalman.'

Didi did not speak. For some time she lay as if unconscious.

Later, when Didi had roused herself, we all three took a bath in the Ganges. Didi threw her iron bangle into

the water, broke her bangles of lac, and obliterated with earth the vermilion mark in the parting of her hair.¹ As the sun rose, she went back to her hut, dressed in the garb of a widow.

She now told us for the first time that Shahji was her husband. Indra was slow to believe this. 'But are you not a Hindu, Didi?' he asked with doubt in his voice.

'Yes, I am a Brahmin's daughter,' said Didi. 'Shahji was also a Brahmin.'

Indra remained silent for a while and then said, 'Why did he lose his caste?'

'I cannot tell you just why,' she replied. 'But when he lost his caste, I too lost mine in consequence. A wife is but a partner in the husband's spiritual life. I have never done anything to lose my caste on my own account. I have never done anything forbidden.'

'I have noticed that, Didi,' said Indra, whose voice was now thick with emotion, 'and that is why I have always wondered—pardon me, Didi, for this—how you were led into this manner of life. But now I won't be gainsaid, you must come to my home. Let us start now.'

Didi appeared to be considering something. After a long time she raised her head and said, 'I cannot go anywhere now, Indranath.'

'Why not, Didi?'

'He has left some debts. I cannot go elsewhere without paying them off.'

1. According to Hindu custom, bangles are a sign that their wearer is not a widow, and an iron bangle and the vermilion mark are signs that their wearer is a married woman.

‘I know that,’ said Indra angrily. ‘He has left some debts in grog-shops and *ganja*-shops. But what is that to you ? Let me see who dares to ask you for payment ! Come with me and let me just see who stands in your way !’

Didi smiled even in her grief. ‘You foolish boy,’ she said, ‘who can stand in my way but my own conscience ? Is not my husband’s debt my own ? How will you keep that creditor of mine, my conscience, at bay ? Go home now. I shall pay off my debts after selling what little I have got. Come again to-morrow or the day after.’

Thus far I had not spoken : I now said, ‘Didi, I have got four or five rupees more at my home ; may I bring them ?’ Before I had finished speaking she stood up, and, drawing me to her like a little child, she kissed my forehead. ‘No, my dear,’ she said, ‘I do not want them. I have not forgotten those five rupees you left with me the other day : I shall not forget your kindness till my dying day. I bless you, my child,’ and tears came pouring down her cheeks.

At about eight o’clock we started homewards, and Didi came with us up to the lane. Holding Indra by the hand she said, ‘Indranath, I have given my blessings to Srikanta, but I dare not bless you, for you are beyond the reach of blessings. But my heart has dedicated you, my brother, at the feet of God. May He make you His own.’

She had understood him. Disregarding her protests, Indra knelt down before her and put the dust of her feet on his head. ‘Didi,’ he said, on the verge of tears, ‘I do not like to leave you alone here in the jungle. I feel that I shall never see you again.’

Didi made no reply. She turned away suddenly and wiped her eyes : then she went back towards her desolate hut. We stood looking at her as long as she was visible. But not once did she turn her head : when she disappeared out of sight her head was still bent down.

Three days later, as I was leaving school in the afternoon, I saw Indra standing near the gate. His face was wan and dim : he had no shoes on and he was dusty up to his knees. His appearance distressed me ; he belonged to a wealthy family, and was usually rather fastidious about his appearance and clothes. I had never seen him like this before. He made a sign to me to come to the playground and when I met him there he said, 'Didi is gone, she has gone somewhere.' He did not even look at me. 'I have been searching for her since yesterday, but I have not been able to find her anywhere. She has left a letter for you; here it is', and he thrust a folded piece of yellow paper into my hand and left me quickly. Perhaps his heart was so overpowered with grief that it was impossible for him to stay near anyone or talk with anyone.

I sat down at once and, unfolding the piece of paper, began to read. Though at this distance of time I cannot remember everything that was written in it, I can remember most of it. Didi had written, 'Srikanta, I send you my blessings before I go. Not only to-day, but as long as I live, I shall always bless you two. But do not grieve for me. I know that Indra will search for me, but do ask him not to. I have no hope that you will now understand everything I am writing. But I write this in the hope that you will understand some day. I could have told you all about myself by word of mouth, and yet I

Srikanta

have never been able to do so though I have attempted it several times. Unless I tell you to-day, my story will remain untold for ever. It is not merely a story about myself, it is about my husband as well. I cannot say how much I have sinned in this life, but I have no doubt that the sins of my past lives know no bounds. So, whenever I have attempted to tell my story I have thought that I ought not to add to my sins by speaking ill of my husband. He is now no more. Yet I do not think that speaking about him would be any less a sin. Still I cannot take leave of you unless I tell you the story of my sorrowful life.

'Srikanta, your poor Didi's name is Annada. I do not reveal my husband's name : you will understand why when you have read this letter to the end. My father was a rich man. He had no sons, only myself and one other daughter. My father married me to a poor man whom he kept at his house, and set out to educate and make a man of. He succeeded in educating him, but not in making a man of him. My elder sister had lost her husband and was living with us. My husband killed her and disappeared. You are too young to understand why he did this evil deed but you will understand some day. I cannot express what ignominy I suffered, what poignant shame. Still your Didi endured it all, though the pain, the fire of indignity, which my husband had kindled for me, has not yet abated after all these years. Seven years afterwards, I saw him again. He was playing to a snake before our house in the garb in which you have seen him. Nobody else could recognize him, but I did : he could not deceive my eyes. He said that he braved the danger of recognition for my sake alone. But that was a lie. Yet

one dark night when all were asleep, I opened a back-door and actually left my father's house to follow my husband all through life. Everyone heard and everyone believed that Annada had run away to a life of ignominy and shame. I shall have to bear the burden of this shame throughout my life. But there is no help for it. While my father was alive I could not go back and tell my story. I knew him ; he would never have forgiven the murderer of his child. Though my fear for my husband no longer exists, how can I go and tell him my story now ? Who would believe me after all these years ? So I have no place in my father's home. Besides I am a Mahomedan.

' I have discharged my husband's debts. I have sold two gold ear-rings which I kept hidden from him. I have not spent the five rupees you gave me. I have left them with the grocer whose shop stands on the main road at the crossing. He will give them to you if you ask him for them. My dear brother, do not reproach me for this. I am returning your rupees, it is true, but I am taking with me your beautiful young heart. And I ask of you one thing, dear Srikanta, before I go. Do not distress yourself by thinking about me. Know that wherever I may be, I shall be well, for after so much suffering and sorrow new sufferings do not hurt me. Your Didi has truly become insensible to all pain. I cannot find words for blessing you, my two young brothers ; I will say only this, if God hears the prayers of an honest woman, your friendship will ever remain to you both an inviolable treasure.

' Your sister,

Annada.'

I went to the grocer's shop. When the grocer heard why I had come, he brought out a bundle wrapped up in a piece of cloth, and untying it showed me a pair of gold ear-rings and five rupees. He gave the rupees to me and said, 'She sold the ear-rings to me for twenty-one rupees, and after paying for Shahji's debts she went away, though I could not say where. After paying the debts she had only five and a half annas left to take with her.'

With this paltry sum as her only support, the helpless and lonely woman had started out on her wanderings !

Lest the two boys who had loved her so dearly should make futile attempts to help her, she had not let them know when she started on her journey. It grieved me that she had declined to take my five rupees. What pleasure and pride I had taken in the thought that my money had been useful to her ! Now all that pride and pleasure vanished in a moment. In my wounded pride I could not help giving way to tears, to conceal which I had to leave the old grocer quickly. 'She has taken help from Indra again and again,' I said to myself, 'but from me she will take nothing : she has returned the only thing that I could give her.'

As I grew older my resentment faded, and I came to wonder how it was that I thought myself worthy of giving her anything. She was a burning flame reducing to ashes everything that was consigned to her, and that was why, perhaps, she thought it best to return my paltry gift. As for Indra, he was surely made of different stuff, and had the right to give where I had none. Besides, Didi had taken his money for the sake of one who at the time I made my offer needed gifts no longer.

Since Didi left us I have wandered in many places but I have never again seen or heard of her. Nevertheless I still carry in my heart the image of her lovely face with its sweet, sad smile. Whenever I think of her and bow down my head to her blessed memory, I cannot help saying, 'What strange judgment is thine, O God! I can see that in this land, famous for ideal wives, sufferings heighten the glory of wifely constancy and love. I can also see how the sorrows of all such wives become transmuted into the eternal halo which makes their memory a constant inspiration and ideal of duty to the women of this country. But why didst Thou ordain such an ironical destiny for my Didi? Why should she, who had been faithful to her husband till his death, have her pure brow branded with the taint of infidelity? Why should she be banished from all society? What did she not sacrifice—her caste, her faith, society, honour, her all? She whose seat is as high as that of Sita or Savitri,—what did her parents and relatives, her friends and foes, think her to be to the end of their lives? A faithless wife and an abandoned woman! What hast Thou gained in this, O God, and what has the world gained?'

If I could only have known who her family and friends were! No matter how far away they lived I would have gone, had I known where to find them, and would have said, 'This was the Annada you know! Such was the imperishable story of her suffering life! If you can remember her whom you have regarded as a sinful woman and take her name once every morning, it will redeem you from many of your sins.'¹

1. A Hindu believes that the repetition of the name of a holy person has the effect of purification and the power of lessening the burden of one's sins.

VII

AFTER Didi's disappearance I did not see Indra for a long time. Whenever I went to the river I saw his dinghy lying tied to the bank, tossed on the water in the blazing sun, but Indra was not to be seen. However he and I were to have one more trip in the dinghy, though only one.

It was an intensely chilly evening : showers during the day had given a special edge to the piercing cold. A full moon rode high in the clear heavens. Indra suddenly appeared, God knows from where. 'Will you come to see a play?' he asked. A play was such a rarity to me that I jumped at the offer. 'Well then, get dressed and come along to our house at once.' It took only a minute to wrap a shawl round me and run out of the house. We had to make the journey by train. I thought we were going to the station in Indra's father's carriage and that was why he wanted me to lose no time. However Indra announced that we should have to go in his dinghy. This damped my ardour considerably. We should have to go against the stream, which meant hard work and a great deal of delay. We might even be too late for the play. 'Never fear,' said Indra; 'the wind is strong and we shan't be late. My Natunda¹ has just arrived from Calcutta; he wants to go by the river.'

1. Literally *New Brother*. When *Big Brother*, *Middle Brother*, *Little Brother* have arrived, it is not uncommon to call the next one just *New Brother*. Indranath must have had several cousins older than Natunda.

Having hoisted the sail and got the canoe ready I waited for Indra and his Natunda. They came very late, and my first glimpse of Natunda was not reassuring. He was a Calcutta dandy, that is to say a dandy *par excellence*. He came attired in silk socks, shining pumps, and a heavy overcoat, with a woollen muffler round his neck, gloves on his hands, and a cap on his head : there was no end to his precautions against the biting, cold wind. Having graciously remarked that our dinghy was 'rotten', he got into it with great difficulty, leaning on Indra's shoulder and supporting himself with my proffered hand, and with great care sat down in the centre of the canoe, the picture of condescending dignity.

'What is your name, eh ?'

'Srikanta,' I said timidly.

'Srikanta !' he said, contemptuously, showing his teeth. 'Say only Kanta. Just prepare a smoke for me, will you? Indra, where have you kept the *hookah* and the *chillim*? Give them to this boy : let him prepare a smoke.'

The lordly hauteur of his gesture terrified me and abashed Indra. 'Come here and hold the rudder,' said Indra to me: 'I'll prepare the smoke.'

Without a word I began to prepare the *chillim*. For Indra's Natunda was his mother's sister's son and was a resident of Calcutta, who had recently passed the Inter-

1. Srikanta is rather a rustic name. A Bengali prefixes his name with 'Sri', which is considered auspicious. For Srikanta, however, 'Sri' is not this prefix, but a part of the name itself. This is what the young dandy from Calcutta did not understand.

mediate Examination in Arts. But his demeanour had permanently disturbed my peace of mind. When I had handed him the *koubah* his face relaxed with the pleasure of smoking and he asked, 'Well, where do you live, Natunda? What is that black thing you have got on you? A shawl, is it? What a fine shawl, to be sure! It has got a smell of grease about it that would make the dirtiest Arab run! Just let me have it, will you? I'll be more comfortable if I sit on it.'

'Take my shawl, Natunda. I am not feeling cold at all', and Indra quickly threw his shawl to him. Natunda sat down comfortably on it and went on smoking in a far more contented humour. It was winter and the Ganges therefore was not very wide; we reached the other side of the river in half an hour. But the wind dropped at once, and Indra said anxiously, 'Natunda, we are in an awkward fix; the wind has dropped and our sails are useless now.'

'Let this young fellow row, then,' Natunda replied. Indra smiled at the inexperience of his town-bred relative, as he said, 'Row! no one could row against this current. We'll have to go back.'

Natunda suddenly blazed into anger at this proposal. 'Why did you ever bring me in this damned dinghy of yours? You *must* take me there somehow. I tell you, you must! I've got to play on the harmonium! They've specially asked me to do it.' 'They've got people to play on the harmonium all right,' Indra replied. 'The play won't be postponed if you can't go, Natunda.'

'What, who can play on the harmonium in this beastly, barbarous place of yours? No, you must take me there

somehow, I tell you.' He made a grimace that made my gorge rise. Later I had the privilege of hearing him play on the harmonium, but the less I say about that the better. Realizing the sad plight of Indra, I said, almost in a whisper, 'Indra, what about towing the boat along?' I had hardly finished speaking when I was startled by a terror-inspiring grimace as Natunda snarled, 'What about trying, eh? And when will you set about it, pray? How long will you sit there like a sheep?'

After this, Indra and I began to tow the canoe in turn. Over high banks and low, at times having to pass quite close to the ice-cold water, we towed the little canoe along. At intervals we had to stop to refill the *hookah* with tobacco for our exquisite who never offered us the slightest help in our exhausting labours. Once Indra suggested his holding the rudder; and he replied that he would catch pneumonia by taking his gloves off in the cold. 'I did not mean you should take them off,' Indra explained.

'Just so! You meant I should spoil them for good, of course, you silly ass!'

In fact I have seldom had the misfortune to come across a man so utterly selfish and ungrateful.

All the pains that we took to gratify his paltry whims did not affect him in the least, though his age after all was not much greater than ours. Afraid of catching cold and spoiling his valuable overcoat, he sat motionless in the canoe, wearing us to death with his incessant orders.

And now another complication arose. The brisk night air had given our passenger an appetite, which was fanned into a roaring blaze by his incessant shouting. It was already ten o'clock, and the information that it would be

was tightly closed and the grocer was fast asleep inside. It is impossible for me to convey an adequate notion of the depth of these country people's sleep to anyone who has not known it at first hand. They are not dyspeptic or lazy landholders, nor are they members of the Bengali *bourgeoisie*, restless and disturbed with cares and anxieties, the chief of which is the worry of getting their daughters married. They therefore know how to sleep. Once they have stretched themselves out on their rough cots, at the end of their day's toil, it is almost impossible to waken them by the ordinary methods of shouting and knocking at the door : it seems that nothing short of setting their houses on fire will arouse them from their slumbers.

We stood outside the shop, and after shouting at the top of our voices for nearly half an hour, and doing everything that we could think of to awaken those inside, we returned unsuccessful to the river bank. But Heavens ! Where was he of Calcutta, our hero ? As far as we could see, there was not a single soul beside ourselves in sight. The dinghy was still there, but where had Natunda gone to ? Both of us shouted with all our strength 'Natunda !' Our own voices answered us, echoing back from the high banks, right and left. We knew that people had seen wolves in these parts on winter nights, and all at once Indra said, 'What if wolves have fallen on him ?' My hair stood on end. Natunda's outrageous behaviour had certainly angered me, but even for him I could never have desired such a terrible fate.

Both of us suddenly saw something shining in the moonlight on the sands at some distance. Going up to it, we found that it was one of Natunda's much valued pumps. Indra threw himself on the damp sands, crying,

‘Srikanta, his mother is staying with us too. I can’t go home.’ Everything was as clear as daylight to me. I remembered that while we were holloaing over there in our futile attempt to rouse the grocer, we had heard the barking of dogs. They were, no doubt, trying to bring to the notice of the village the tragedy that was happening before their eyes. Even now we could hear their barking at a distance. We had no doubt in our minds that they were howling over the spot where the wolves had devoured Natunda.

Indra suddenly stood up and said, ‘I’m going over there.’ I caught hold of his hands and said, ‘Don’t be a madman, Indra.’ Indra made no reply but came back to the dinghy and took out the pole. With this on his shoulder and his open knife in his left hand he started, saying, ‘You stay here, Srikanta. If I don’t come back, go home and tell them what has happened. I am going.’

His face was very pale, but his eyes were glowing with excitement and determination. I knew him very well. This was no boyish boast, easily brought to nothing at the first sign of real danger. It would be impossible to turn him back. How could I prevent him, who had never known fear, from going ? When I saw him leaving me, I took up a piece of bamboo and began to follow him. Indra turned around and, catching hold of my hand, said, ‘Are you mad, Srikanta ? It isn’t your fault at all. Why should you come ?’

‘It isn’t your fault either,’ I retorted in rather a quavering voice : ‘so why should you go ?’

Indra pulled my bamboo out of my hand and threw it into the canoe, saying, ‘No, it isn’t my fault either. I didn’t want to bring Natunda with me. But I can’t return without him, and I must go.’

So must I too. For I was no coward either. So I took up the piece of bamboo again and without further discussion we both pushed forward. 'Don't try to run over sand ; it is no use,' said Indra ; 'if you want to get away any time, jump into the river.'

There was a sand-dune in front of us. As we mounted it, we saw five or six dogs barking at some distance from us close to the water. Except for the dogs, no other creature was in sight, no wolf, not even a jackal. As we approached cautiously we saw that they were guarding some black object in the river. Indra shouted, 'Natunda !'

'I am here,' came a sobbing voice indistinctly from the water.

We ran as fast as our legs would carry us. The dogs stood aside and Indra jumped into the river. When he dragged his Calcutta cousin, in a half-drowning condition out of the neck-deep water, Natunda still held on one of his pumps, besides his overcoat, gloves, muffler, and cap, all soaked and swollen.

After we had left him, the village dogs, attracted by his musical voice and excited by its nasal melody and by his wonderful costume, had made a shameful assault on our hero. He had run thus far, and, seeing no other means of defending himself, had jumped into the river. Standing neck-deep in this icy-cold water for half an hour on an intensely cold night, he had done sufficient penance for his previous sins. But it was no easy task for us to revive him from the effects of the penance. What is most strange and surprising, however, is that the first words he spoke after we had landed him on the bank and pulled

off his waterlogged garments, were, 'Where is my other pump ?'

As soon as we told him that it was behind the dune, he forgot all his sorrows, roused himself, and started off with the intention of securing it with the least possible delay. On the way he expressed repeated regrets for his coat, his muffler, his socks, and his gloves, by turns berating us, fools that we were, for having stripped them off him in such a hurry. If we had only left them on he complained, they would not have been soiled by contact with dust and dirt. We were no better than rustic clowns ; we had never seen such things ; this was the burden of his refrain as he poured out his grievances. In his grief for his gorgeous clothes he forgot the claims of his body which a short while ago he had been afraid of exposing to a single drop of water. He was a striking instance of how the means often overshadows the end.

It was after two o'clock when our dinghy came back to our landing-place. Apparelled in Indra's shawl, and girded with mine, the foul smell of which he had previously remarked upon, Natunda hurried home, repeatedly giving it as his deliberate opinion that my shawl was too nauseating to use as a door-mat. However that may have been, we were full of joy at the thought that instead of falling a prey to wolves he had returned intact. Submitting to his reiterated abuse and unceasing insolence with smiling faces, we concluded our eventful trip by returning home clad only in our *dhotis* and trembling in every limb in that frosty, winter night. Thus ended our last trip in the dinghy. We were never to set foot in it again.

VIII

AS I write down these records of my past life I often wonder who gave the chaotic elements of my experience the order and the arrangement that they possess in my memory. They did not all occur in the order in which I am now relating them. Nor can I say that all the links are there. Some have dropped, and yet the chain of my memory has not snapped. Who is it that repairs the breaches and keeps it intact as ever ?

A second wonder is that here, in the region of my memory, the big things do not crush the little things. If they did, one would remember only the big and important incidents of one's life. But that is not the case. As I think of my youth and childhood, many small and paltry matters come into my mind, things that somehow have taken a disproportionately tenacious hold of it, while bigger things have withered and faded out of existence. Thus in my narrative many a trifle has bulked large, while other events much more momentous have entirely passed into oblivion. It is not for me, however, to explain these anomalies of the human mind ; I content myself with merely commenting on them.

I recall to-day how one of these insignificant events, occurring most casually, led to one of the most significant experiences of my life. Many years had passed since Didi had disappeared, and her image was growing dim in my memory. At first the recollection of her face had

been a curb to the wild impulses of my early youth, but now it was growing distant and vague.

At the time, I was a guest at a *shikar* party given by a Raja's son. I had been his school-mate and had often secretly done his mathematical exercises for him; so we had been great friends. After the matriculation class we had separated. I knew that Rajas' sons had proverbially short memories, so I never dreamed that he would write to me. We met by the merest chance. He had just attained majority, and a large fortune, the accumulation of many years, had come into his hand, when someone told him that I was a crack shot with a rifle, and my skill was painted in such glowing colours that he decided that I was a fit person to belong to the circle of his intimate friends. As our *shastras* tell us never to disobey the summons of kings and princes, I could not but obey. I went. An elephant sent by the prince awaited me at the station. After a ride of some twenty miles I came upon an encampment which even the most fastidious could not but count worthy of a prince who had risen above the trammels of his minority. Five tents had been pitched: one for his highness, one for his friends, one for the servants, the fourth to serve as a dining-tent, while the fifth was set apart at some distance for the use of a *baiji* and her retinue of attendants.

It was night already, and on entering the prince's tent I could see that the entertainment which was going on had commenced some time earlier. The prince accorded me a very warm welcome, but, when he attempted to rise from his cushion to show me greater honour, he was unfortunately forced to sink back upon it 'dizzy, lost, yet

unbewailing'. His friends welcomed me with indistinct murmurs of emotion. I was a complete stranger to them, but they, in the condition they were in, stood in no need of formal introductions.

Piari, the *baiji*, who was singing, had been engaged from Patna for two weeks. The prince had to pay well for her services, but I must admit that his choice did credit to his taste and judgment. She was beautiful and sweet-voiced, and really understood her art. The song stopped as I entered. Then, after the inevitable interchange of polite remarks appropriate to the occasion, the prince requested me to call for the music that I liked. This embarrassed me at first but I soon realized that I alone possessed any ear for music in a company where all the rest were, so far as any aesthetic appreciation was concerned, no better than buffaloes.

Soon the *baiji* brightened up. It is possible of course to do almost anything when it is adequately paid for. But I could see that in this assembly of dolt's it was really painful for her to give an exhibition of her art. She seemed quite relieved to get one person who could appreciate it at last. From then on until late that night she seemed to be employing all her art, her exquisite voice, her flowerlike beauty for my sake alone, keeping down with her liquid melodies the foul atmosphere of crude and ugly animalism that surrounded me. And then at last her song died away and stopped. Perhaps never in her life had she sung with a deeper emotion or finer sincerity than on that night ; and I had listened as one entranced. When she stopped I could only say, 'Very fine.'

Piari

Piari looked down and smiling put her folded palms to her forehead in acknowledgment of the bald compliment; she did not *salaam* me, Musalman fashion, as is customary with most singers. The musical *soirée* had come to an end.

Some of those present were asleep, some drowsy, most of them were half-seas over with drink. As the *baiji* was going out of the tent with her attendants, I could not help saying, in the excess of my delight, 'Baiji, I congratulate myself that I shall have the privilege of hearing you sing every day for two weeks.' I spoke in Hindi, for I took her to be an up-country singer.

She stopped abruptly, and then, coming towards me a little, said in a very low voice and in clear Bengali, 'I must sing, for I have been paid. But how can you attend on him for a fortnight? I would advise you to go away to-morrow.'

I was taken by surprise at this reply. Before I could think of anything to say, she had left the tent. Next morning His Highness issued forth in great state on a hunting expedition. Ten sportsmen were to accompany him, the guns numbering fifteen, of which six were rifles. There was a great bustle and to-do in camp as preparations, most of them having to do with food and drink, were made for the day's sport. Before long we reached our hunting ground, the banks of a river which had almost dried up. On one bank was a village, the other bank was a sandy reef. On the nearer bank there were large silk-cotton trees, extending over two miles, and on the sand of the reef, a few shrubs of *kash* and clumps of *kusha* grass scattered about. Here our sport was going to

begin, with our fifteen guns. I saw a few doves on some of the silk-cotton trees, and a couple of creatures, probably Brahminy ducks, swimming in the moribund stream close by.

A lively discussion followed as to which direction each gun should take, in the course of which all took the opportunity of infusing fresh vigour into their systems by quaffing a glass or two of drink. I put my gun down on the ground. The *baiji's* taunt had already made my mind uneasy and now the scene of our sport aroused my profound disgust.

'What a dull fellow you are to-day, Kanta, to be sure,' said the prince. 'What are you doing? Why do you put your gun down?'

'I don't kill birds.'

'What's that? But why, why don't you?'

'I haven't handled a shot-gun since I grew a moustache : I have forgotten how to use it.'

His highness the prince was convulsed with laughter. How much of his glee was due to drink is hard to say.

Saraju was the leader of the *shikar*-party that day and the chief ornament of the prince's scarlet retinue. I had heard, soon after my arrival, of his unerring marksmanship. He asked me angrily, 'Is there any shame in shooting birds?'

My temper was not quite under control, so I replied, 'Not to everyone, but to me there is.' I said hurriedly to the prince, 'Your highness, I don't feel very well', and returned to the tent without caring to notice who smiled or grimaced behind my back.

I had just lain down on the mattress spread out on the floor and had lighted a cigarette after ordering a cup of tea, when a servant entered and respectfully informed me that the *baiji* desired to have an interview with me. This was what I was hoping for.

‘Why does she wish to see me?’ I asked.

‘I do not know, sir.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I am her butler, sir.’

‘Are you a Bengali?’

‘Yes, sir, *paramanik*¹ by caste. My name is Ratan, sir.’

‘Is the *baiji* a Hindu?’

‘Should I, sir, have served under her otherwise?’ Ratan answered smiling.

Ratan accompanied me as far as his mistress’s tent and after showing me the entrance disappeared. Raising the curtain I went in and saw that the *baiji* awaited me alone. The dancer’s gown and scarf² that she had worn on the previous night had deceived me, but now I had no difficulty in seeing that, whoever she might be, she was a Bengali. She sat, dressed in a silk *sari*, on a carpet of great value. On seeing me enter, she got up and, indicating a seat with a smile, said, ‘Please sit down. No, I won’t smoke before you. Ratan, take this *hookah* away! Why, won’t you sit down?’

1. *Paramanik*, barber. It is an occupational caste in Bengal, but they do not confine themselves to the barber’s profession alone.

2. Gown and scarf. The dress generally worn by up-country Musalman women singers.

Ratan came in and removed the hookah. 'I know you smoke,' the *baiji* said, 'but what can I offer you? What you may or may not do at other places is no concern of mine. But I could not offer you my own *hookah*. I will get you some cigars. Ratan!'

'Don't trouble, I don't need any cigars; I have got some with me.'

'You have? Well then, just sit down quietly, please, for I have much to tell you. Nobody knows how God gets people to meet at unexpected places: nobody could dream it. You went out to the *shikar*: what made you return so soon?'

'I didn't like it.'

'Just so: you wouldn't. What a cruel race men-folk are! They know best what pleasure they get in killing harmless creatures for nothing. Is your father well?'

'Father is dead.'

'I am very sorry. And your mother?'

'She went before him.'

'Oh, that is how—' and the *baiji* heaved a sigh and fixed her eyes on me. I seemed to feel that her eyes, for one brief instant, grew moist in sympathy. But perhaps that was an illusion. Yet when she next spoke I could not mistake the fact that the frivolous and coquettish voice of this keen-witted woman had really become tender. 'Then,' she said, 'you haven't got a soul who really cares for you and looks after you. Are you still with your aunt? Where else would you go, after all? You haven't

married, I can see that. Are you studying at college ? Or have you finished ?'

I had borne with her curiosity and her string of queries in patience. But her last question annoyed me. 'Well, and who are you ?' I asked rudely. 'I don't remember ever having seen you before. Why do you wish to know so much about me ? Will it profit you anything to know all this ?'

Piari did not get angry at this outburst of mine : she merely smiled. 'Are profit and loss the only things in this world ? Is there nothing like natural feeling, affection, or love ? My name is Piari : but since you cannot recognise me by my face, could you do so if you heard the nickname of my childhood ?'

'Where is your home then ?'

'No. I won't tell you that.'

'Won't you tell me your father's name ?'

The *baiji* pressed her tongue between her teeth,¹ and said, 'He is in heaven now. Alas, how can I utter his name with this sinful tongue of mine ?'

I grew impatient and said, 'If you can't, perhaps you can say how you came to recognise me ?'

Piari saw the state of mind I was in, and smiled archly. 'No, I don't mind telling you. But would you find it possible to believe me ?'

'Let me hear it first.'

'My evil genius made me recognise you : what else could it be ? It is fortunate for me that the sun has

1. To show the delicacy or shame she felt in uttering his name.

dried up all the tears you made me shed or they would have formed a pool, a big pool. Can you recognize me now, my good sir?'

Indeed, I could not recognize her. But that was my own fault entirely. My memory was to blame. I noticed that Piari's lips had a way of curving up, giving an impression that everything she said was in banter and that she was laughing inwardly. I felt that I had seen those lips before, but I could not remember where. As it was, I could say nothing.

After a few moments' silence Piari laughed aloud, and it seemed to me all of a sudden that her laughter concealed embarrassment. 'No, sir, you are not so foolish as I thought,' she said. 'It has not escaped you that I have my own way of speaking, but many people with cleverer heads than yours have been taken in by my words. And if you are so clever, why have you adopted the profession of a parasite? The noble profession of a hanger-on is not for such as you. Go, leave the place instantly!'

Hot anger surged up within me, but I refrained from giving expression to it. 'Well,' I said quietly, 'I must regard myself as fortunate so long as I am in somebody's service. Something to do is better than nothing, don't you agree? Now I'll take leave or people outside will really suspect something.'

'After all,' the *baiji* answered, 'why should you worry? If people do have such suspicions, I hardly think you would find it a matter for regret.'

I stalked to the door without answering her. As I reached it she suddenly burst into a peal of laughter.

‘Don’t you forget, my dear,’ she said mockingly, ‘to tell that story of my pool of tears ! Properly told in the circle of your friends or before his highness the prince and his satellites, it might even turn the scale of your fortune.’

I left her tent without saying another word, but the woman’s coarse banter and shameless laughter continued to torment me like the bite of a scorpion.

Going back to my tent I drank a cup of tea and lit a cigar. As my brain cooled, I began to think, ‘Who is this woman ?’ I could distinctly remember the facts of my life as far back as my fifth year, and yet, so far as I could see, there was nothing to suggest her. At the same time it was clear that she knew me well ; she even knew about my aunt. She knew also that I was poor. What designs could she have on me ? It was equally clear, however, that she wanted me away with all her heart. And yet why was she interested in my staying or going ? She had said, ‘Are profit and loss the only things in this world ? Is there nothing like affection or love ?’ I could not help smiling at the thought of these words which she, whom I had never seen before, had uttered so glibly. But, most of all, her parting words of derision pricked and irritated me remorselessly and incessantly.

Towards evening the prince and his friends returned from their sport. I heard from an attendant that the bag consisted of eight doves. The prince sent for me but I feigned illness and lay in bed, whence, till late at night, I could hear Piari’s songs and the drunken appreciation of the prince’s party.

After this, three or four days dragged by in almost uninterrupted monotony. I say 'almost' because everything except the daily sport was invariably the same. I soon observed a rapidly waning enthusiasm for sport among all: whether this was out of consideration for Piari's distaste for it, I cannot say. No one seemed willing to stir out of the tents. But they did not want me to go away. There was no special reason for me to wish to bolt except the disgust I had conceived for the *baiji*. Her presence affected me like a physical assault: I only felt relief when I could get away from her. If I could not do that, I had to look somewhere else, talk to someone, or in some such way distract my attention. I could feel that every moment she was trying to meet my eyes. The first day or two she had attempted a few jokes at my expense, but my attitude made her give up all levity.

It was a Saturday. Everything had grown perfectly intolerable to me. As I had made up my mind to go after dinner, music had been arranged for the afternoon. The *baiji* had grown tired, and suddenly somebody began the pick of all stories, ghost stories. In an instant we all gathered around the speaker.

At first I was not much attracted by the story but soon I sat up and was listening greedily. The speaker was an elderly gentleman from the village. He knew the delicate art of story-telling to perfection. He was saying, 'If any gentleman here disbelieves in the spirit-world, let him have all his doubts set at rest for ever to-night in this very village. To-night will be a moonless Saturday night, and, whatever kind of man he may be, a saint or a sinner, a Brahmin or a Sudra, whether he goes alone or in the company of others; if he visits the cremation-

grounds of the village to-night, he will not go in vain. Not only will he see wandering ghosts, he will also hear their voices and can, if he likes, hold converse with them.' I remembered the exploits and adventures of my boyhood and burst into laughter. The old man looked towards me and said, 'Please come here.' When I went to him he asked me gravely, 'You do not believe in ghosts?'

'No.'

'Why do you not? Is there any special reason for your disbelief?'

'No.'

'Well, then, there are holy men in this village of ours who have seen them with their own eyes. And because you have read a few pages of English, you think fit to disbelieve me and laugh in my face. I had forgotten, though, that Bengalis are atheists and unbelievers.' I was surprised at the turn the matter had taken. 'My dear sir,' I said, 'I do not wish to argue about this matter. My belief is my own. Whether I be an atheist or not, I do not believe in ghosts. Those who say they have seen them have either been deceived or are liars : that is my belief.'

Suddenly the old gentleman caught hold of my right hand and asked, 'Will you go to the cremation-grounds to-night?' 'I will,' I replied laughing. 'I have gone to many cremation-grounds on many nights since my boyhood.'

Hot with anger, the old gentleman began to relate the terrors of the local cremation-ground, a description that seemed to freeze his audience to the very marrow. 'These

at the merest bluster,—these and kindred subjects now occupied the attention of the company. In other words, they devoted themselves to the type of argument that brings delight to the souls of our princes and chiefs, ‘supremely intellectual’ and yet not too subtle to keep them from adding their own contributions to the discussion.

There was still one hour before I was to start, and I was pacing to and fro in front of my tent and turning the matter over in my mind. My master in adventure had early taught me to discard all fear in matters like this : I remembered that night when I was still a boy and Indra had said to me, ‘Srikanta, take the name of Rama mentally: that boy is sitting behind me.’ I had lost consciousness on that night, but never afterwards. I had rid myself for ever of all fear of ghosts. But if the stories I had heard were true, what did they mean? Indra believed in ghosts, but even he had not seen any. However much I entrenched myself behind my scepticism I could not deny that, at times, particular places at particular hours had given me sensations that could only be described as eerie. As I looked at the impenetrable darkness of the night I was suddenly reminded of another moonless night. That also had been a Saturday.

Five or six years earlier, when our neighbour, Niru Didi, a young widow, lay on her death-bed, there was no one to attend to her except myself. She lived alone in a mud-built hut inside an orchard. No one in the village was so unselfish as she, so quick to help others in any kind of trouble. She had taught many of the village girls reading and writing, needlework, and other domestic arts. Every one loved her for the quiet sweetness of her

Srikanta

life, and for the integrity of her character. But when one day she slipped accidentally and became at the age of thirty a helpless cripple confined to her bed, none of her neighbours came forward to do anything for her in her distress. Immaculate Hindu society shut all its doors and windows in her face.¹ Nirm Didi, after an illness of six months which she silently endured in ignorance, neglected by the very neighbours whom she had so often helped and cared for, at last passed away in the middle of a dark, rainy night, without the slightest medical aid to alleviate her pain.

No one but an old maid-servant and I knew that my aunt helped Nirm Didi in secret. She called me to her one day at noon and said, 'Srikanta, my boy, it is not unusual for you, I know, to attend on sick people : I should like you to go and see that poor girl now and then.' After that, I visited her from time to time and supplied her with a few necessities which I purchased with the money my aunt gave me for the purpose. I was the only person who was with her at the time of her death. I have never seen in anybody else at the hour of death such a strange combination of hallucination with full possession of the faculties as I saw in her. I will tell the story to show that though one may not believe in anything uncanny or supernatural one cannot help instinctive reactions of fear.

It was a dark night of rain and storm : after midnight the howling tempest seemed ready to uproot the foundations of the earth in its fury. All the doors and windows

1. Because her physical misfortune was considered to be the penalty for sin in a previous life.

had been shut. I lay on a half-broken easy-chair not far from Niru Didi's bed. She called me to her in her naturally low voice and, drawing my hand close to her mouth, whispered, 'Srikanta, go home.'

'What, Niru Didi, in this storm and rain?'

'Yes, your life before everything else.'

Thinking that her mind was wandering, I said, 'I'll go: only let the rain abate a little.'

She became terribly anxious and cried, 'No, no, Srikanta, you must go at once. Don't delay any more. You must go. You must flee.' Something in her voice startled me. 'Why do you want me to go?' I asked.

In reply she drew my hand closer and, looking at the window, cried aloud, 'Won't you go? Are you bent on losing your life then? Don't you see those black men who have come to take me away and are threatening me because you are here?'

Then began her screams. 'There! under my bed! They're going to kill me! They're taking me away! They're seizing me!' Her screams were incessant and stopped only towards the end of the night, when she had very little life left in her.

That terrible and pathetic night is still engraved in my memory in images of fire. There is no doubt that I experienced inexpressible fear, and that I thought I saw nameless things and shapes.

It is true that the recollection becomes laughable now. But on that night I would have made a wild dash into the

tempestuous night outside, had I not had the firm belief that outside the door I should run into the battalions of black men that Niru Didi saw. I knew that such things could not be, that such terrible presences existed only in her delirious brain; and yet—

‘ Sir ! ’

It was Ratan who was addressing me.

‘ What is the matter ? ’

‘ *Baiji* is desirous of an interview with you, sir.’

I was not merely astonished, I was annoyed. Not only did I think this sudden desire of hers damaging to my self-respect, when I remembered what our attitude towards one another had been during these three or four days ; it also struck me as being unwarranted presumption on her part. But I managed to repress all signs of agitation before the servant, as I replied, ‘ I have no time to-night, Ratan ; I am going to start at once. Tell her we can meet to-morrow.’

Ratan was a well-trained servant, expert in all the arts of diplomacy and etiquette. In a respectfully low voice he said, ‘ The necessity is very urgent, sir ; I beg of you to come for a minute. If you don’t, sir, she has said that she will come here in person.’ Heavens ! here in this tent, at this hour of the night, with so many people about ! ‘ Explain to her, Ratan,’ I said, ‘ that I will see her early to-morrow morning. Under no circumstances can I go to her tent to-night.’

‘ Then,’ said Ratan, ‘ she will come herself, sir. I have known her for these five years, sir, and I have known her

always true to her word. If you don't go, sir, it is certain that she will come here.'

This appeared to me to be sheer unreasoning obstinacy. 'All right,' I said, 'I am coming.'

Entering the tent, I found that, in consequence of their lively bouts, all were asleep. In the servants' tent only two or three were awake. I hurriedly pulled on my boots and put on my coat. Then, taking my rifle, which I had kept ready, I followed Ratan to the *baiji's* tent. Piari was standing waiting for me. She looked me over from head to foot several times, and then said bluntly and angrily, 'You can't go to the cremation-grounds to-night. You must not go there on any account.'

Surprised, I asked, 'Why not?'

'Why not, indeed! Do you really think that there are no ghosts, that you venture to go on a night like this? Do you think that if you do, you will come back alive?' She suddenly burst into tears. I stood there bewildered, unable to think of anything to say. And who would not be embarrassed at being summoned by a strange lady at the dead of night to witness her weeping to save his life? Not getting any reply from me, Piari wiped her tears away and said, 'Will you never know what it is to be reasonable? Will you always remain as obstinate as ever? Let me see the way you take: I'll accompany you.' And she picked up a shawl with the evident intention of throwing it round her shoulders. I merely said, 'All right, come along.' She blazed up at the hidden taunt in my words. 'Yes,' she retorted, 'a fine reputation you would earn that way! "He came to hunt, and went out with a *baiji* at midnight looking for ghosts!" Have

that I will scream and shout and waken everybody here if you attempt to go.' She tried to wrest my gun from my hands. For some time past my annoyance had been giving place to a feeling of amusement. Now I laughed aloud and said, 'I can't say whether ghosts actually exist or not, but I *can* say that there are false ghosts who *do* exist. They speak to you, weep, and stand in your path—and, when the occasion arises, they wring the necks of their victims and drink their blood.'

Piari grew pale and seemed to be much too taken aback to be able to speak. At last she said, 'So you have recognised me, I see. But that is a mistake of yours. Those false ghosts are capable of doing a lot of things, it is true : but they don't obstruct your path for the pleasure of wringing your neck. Even they have a sense of what is due to those who have any claim on them.'

'Well,' I said laughing, 'you are speaking of yourself. Are you a ghost?'

'Of course I am,' said Piari. 'Those that die and yet are not dead, are ghosts, to be sure. Didn't you mean the same thing?' She paused for an instant, and then continued, 'In one sense it is true that I am dead. But whether that is false or true, it was not I who spread the report of my death. My mother got her brother to circulate the rumour Will you hear the whole story?'

At the mention of her 'death', all my doubts vanished : I recognised without a shadow of doubt that she was Rajlakshmi. Many years ago she had gone on a pilgrimage with her mother and she had never come back. Her mother, on her return home, announced that she had died of cholera at Benares. Though at first I had not been able to think of where I had seen her before. I had from

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the beginning noticed her trick of biting her under-lip when she was angry or annoyed. I felt that I had seen somebody, at some time or other, somewhere or other, with that particular trick, but I could not remember by any effort of my memory who had shown this trait, or where, or when. When I realized that Rajlakshmi had become Piari, I was overpowered with wonder.

Years before, in the days when I was the senior pupil in our village school, her father, a famous *kulin*,¹ married again and turned her mother out of his house. The mother, with her two daughters, Suralakshmi and Rajlakshmi, returned to her parents. Rajlakshmi was then eight or nine years of age ; Suralakshmi was twelve or thirteen. Rajlakshmi was very fair, but frequent attacks of malaria had made her a quaint little figure, thin and pale with scanty, copper-coloured hair. She was so afraid of a beating from me that every day she would go into the thickets of *bainchi* trees and make a garland of their ripe fruits for me. Sometimes I would ask her to repeat her old lessons, and if she made the slightest mistake, I would slap her to my heart's content. Rajlakshmi's only remonstrance at such times was to sit in silence biting her under-lip. She never told me how difficult it was for her to gather the ripe *bainchi* fruits. I had always thought that her only reason for doing it was her fear of my beating her, but now, for the first time, I wondered if there might have been another reason . . . Then she was married. It was a strange affair. Her uncle passed many sleepless nights because he could not secure suitable bridegrooms for his nieces. One day he learnt by accident that Birinchi Datta's cook, whom

1. The highest class of Bengali Brahmin.

he had brought with him on his transfer from Bankura, was the son of a 'low' *kulin*¹ Brahmin. At once Rajlakshmi's uncle besought Mr. Datta to secure his cook as joint husband for the two girls as, if he did not get them married off immediately, he was in imminent danger of losing his high Brahmin caste. All knew that the Datta's cook was a quiet fellow, obliging and mild to the point of idiocy, but on this occasion he showed himself the equal of any one in worldly wisdom. At the mention of fifty-one rupees as the dowry, he shook his head vehemently and said, 'My dear sir, you can't do it so cheap. Find out first what the present-day rate is. You can't get a decent pair of rams for fifty-one rupees, and yet you expect to find a bridegroom for that sum ! Let me have a hundred and one rupees, and I will marry both the girls without demur ; that will relieve you at one stroke of your worries concerning them both. When you come to think of it, a hundred rupees is no more than the price of two bulls : surely you don't consider that an extravagant demand?' No, his demand was certainly not excessive. After much argument and discussion, higgling and haggling, the parties compromised on seventy rupees, and that very night the girls were married. Two days later the bridegroom took seventy rupees in cash from their uncle and, deserting his brides, left for Bankura. He was never heard of again. One year and a half later Suralakshmi died of fever, and eighteen months after that Rajlakshmi's death at Benares was reported. This was briefly, the history of Piari, the *baiji*.

'Shall I tell you,' she asked, 'what your thoughts are?'

'Try,' I said.

1. It is considered derogatory for a *kulin* to marry into a *non-kulin* family.

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'You are thinking, "How I made her suffer in her childhood ! I sent her everyday to the thorny *bainchi* thickets and beat her again and again for her pains. Never in all that time did she ask anything of me. Now that she at last makes this request, let me grant it, and not go to the cremation-grounds to-night." Tell me, aren't those your thoughts ?'

I burst out laughing.

'You see !' she cried, laughing triumphantly. 'How could one forget the playmate of one's boyhood ? How could one refuse to grant her request ? Who indeed could be so heartless ? Come, let us sit down : I've got such an immense lot to tell you. Ratan, come and remove this gentleman's boots. But why are you laughing ?'

'I laugh to see how you women use your spells to make men do your will.'

Piari also laughed. 'Indeed,' she said, 'I may be able to cast my spell over others, but how could I ensnare him who has bound me by *his* spell ever since I could think ? You may say my words are my spells. But did I ever speak a word when I used to make garlands of ripe *bainchi*, even though the thorns scratched and tore my hands ? I suppose you think that I kept silent for fear of your beating. Don't deceive yourself : Rajlakshmi was never so timid a girl. But fie on you ! You had forgotten me so utterly that you could not recognise me when you saw me !' And in the wild toss of her head that accompanied her laughter I could see the diamonds in her ear-ring swinging as if in uncontrollable merriment.

'But when did I take the trouble to keep your memory sacred,' I asked, 'that I should never forget you ? On

the contrary, I am surprised that I *was* able to recognise you. Well, it is getting on for twelve. Good-night !'

Piari's smiling face at once became pale and colourless. She paused for a moment and then said. 'If you don't believe in spirits, you must believe in snakes and reptiles, tigers, bears, and wild boars in such an out-of-the-way place as this.'

'I do believe in their existence, certainly,' I answered, 'and I am always on guard against them.'

When she saw that I was going, she said, 'I know what kind of a man you are, and I had my fears that I should not be able to dissuade you. Yet I thought I might succeed in keeping you back by my tears and entreaties. But I see that the end of all this has been my tears and entreaties alone.' Not getting any reply from me, she continued, 'Well, go then. I won't spoil your luck by calling you back. If anything happens, your friends, the prince and his cronies, will hardly be of any use to you ; it's I who will have to suffer for it, in this strange country. You know me little ; you have thought fit to play the hero before me, but I, who am only a woman, shall not be able to say, if the question is raised, that I don't know you.'

She suppressed a sigh. I turned back smiling awkwardly : I felt a heaviness in my heart. 'Why, *baiji*,' I said, 'even that would be a great gain to me. I had thought that I was absolutely friendless in the world : now I shall know that there is some one who cares for me, and who won't leave me neglected if anything happens to me.'

'Do you mean,' asked Piari, 'that you never realized that before ? However much you insult me by calling

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me 'baiji', you know at the bottom of your heart that Rajlakshmi could never desert you if you wanted her help. It would have been a good thing, perhaps, if I could : I might have taught you a lesson. What a stupid race women are! If they've loved once, they are done for.'

'Piari,' I said, 'do you know why even the best *sannyasis* don't get alms?'

'Yes,' said Piari, 'I know. But your joke is not pointed enough to wound me. My love is my treasure from the hand of God. It belonged to me before I could tell right from wrong. It is not the growth of a day.'

'Very well, then,' I replied, softened, 'I hope that something may happen to me to-night, so that you may have a clear test of your "treasure from the hand of God".'

'Holy Durga!'² she cried in sudden terror, 'you should be ashamed to say such things. May you come back as you are ! I want no "clear test". What have I done to deserve the good fortune of nursing you back to health and strength with my own hands if you should happen to fall ill ? If that glad service were ever awarded me I should have at least one act of my life to be proud of !' She turned her face away, but in the dim light of the lantern I could see her tears.

'I can only hope that some day your wish may be fulfilled,' I said, as I left the tent. I little knew in what

1. Because the whole profession is distrusted. The garb of *sannyasi* is often a cloak for laziness or greed, or is used by a man whom the police want. Srikanta is here reminding Piari that though she *may* be sincere in her words, she belongs to a class who make their living by traffic in 'love'.

2. A name of Parvati, Shiva's consort; taken to ward off evils and to make an undertaking auspicious.

a terrible way my jesting hope would be realized. I could hear Piari's tearful voice, 'Holy Durga! O Durga!' coming from inside the tent. I took the path that led to the cremation-grounds without further delay.

All the way my mind was filled with thoughts of Piari. I hardly noticed the long, dark path through the mango orchard or the embankment that I had to cross by the side of the river. All the way I thought of the strange and mysterious world which we call a woman's mind. The thought that the frail little girl of my boyhood days had brought me her daily garlands of *bainchi* fruits as tokens of childish love, that she had silently worshipped me then, and that she claimed to have loved me ever since—all this was a surprise to me. But it was something else that perplexed me, not that she could love me, for I knew that love often takes unexpected forms, but that in her ignoble life, so full of falsehoods and insincerities, she should have been able to keep a corner free for the love which she called her 'treasure from the hand of God'. How had she kept it alive? And how could she bear all the artificial poses and false utterances of her daily life?

'Bap!'

I was startled out of my thoughts. Looking in front of me, I saw an immense plain full of grey sand, through which a narrow stream meandered into the distance. Throughout the plain were scattered clumps of *kash* plants. All of a sudden my mind fancied them to be men, invited on that terrible, moonless night to see the dance of spirits, taking their seats on the carpet of the

1. Lit. 'father', an exclamation of startled horror.

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sands and waiting in silence. Overhead, in the dark heavens, were countless stars, also wide awake in anxious silence. No wind or breeze, and no sound. Except for the beating of my heart there was no stir or response from any living thing as far as my eyes could see. The night-bird that had cried 'Bap !' had not opened its mouth again. I advanced slowly towards the west, the direction in which the cremation-grounds lay. A few days before I had noticed some silk-cotton trees that stood like grim gate-keepers of the place, and when I had advanced a little further I saw their dark branches. As I passed under them I heard a faint stir of life, which became more pronounced as I advanced. It was like the sobbing of a tired child whose cries have failed to rouse its mother from sleep and who has become weak and feeble through excessive sobbing. It came from one corner of the cremation-grounds. He who does not know what this cry means, and who hears it for the first time in the dead of night, will refuse to advance another step. I will bet anything on that. If he does not know that the sobbing thing is not a human child but a young vulture, he will have no means of guessing it. Advancing still further, I saw a flock of vultures sitting on the branches of the silk-cotton trees ; the disconsolate crying must have come from a naughty child among them.

It went on crying as before. I passed the tree and stood in a corner of the cremation-grounds. I saw that the statement that one could count a *lakh*¹ of human skulls there was not so much of an exaggeration as I had thought. Nearly the whole of the locality was strewn with human skeletons. The skulls with which the ghostly presences were to play were there in plenty though the

1. *lakh*, 100,000.

players had not yet arrived. I could not discover, however, whether there were any unearthly spectators present. As it was then the darkest hour of the night I sat down on a small sandhill, hoping that the play would commence without much delay. I opened my gun, examined the cartridge, replaced it in the breach, and then, laying the gun on my knees, sat ready for action.

As I waited I thought of Piari's words, 'If you really don't believe in ghosts, why take the trouble to make this foolish trip? And if you are not sure whether they exist or not, I won't let you go.' She was right. What had I come out to see? It was useless to try to conceal my foolishness from my own mind. I had not come to see anything; I had merely come to show what a brave fellow I was; to prove to those that had said, 'Bengalis are cowards in action', that they were really a race of heroes.

For a long time past I had been convinced that death is the end of everything for man, and I now thought that even if he survived death, it would be neither natural nor fitting for him to come back to the place where his body had been subjected to the undignified rites of cremation, in order to kick and roll his own skull about. At least such a wish would hardly have inspired my ghostly breast after my dissolution. But then, of course, tastes differ, and there might be spirits to whom this type of sport would appeal; if so, my having come so far might not prove fruitless. At any rate the elderly gentleman from the village had held out hopes for me earlier in the day.

A sudden gust of wind blew a volume of dust and sand over me: before it had subsided, another gust came, and yet another. 'What is this?' I thought. 'There was no trace of any wind a few minutes ago.' However much we may argue and reason, the instinctive faith that there

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is something unknown after death is bred in our very bones. It exists as long as our bones exist, whether we admit its existence or not. These gusts of wind, therefore, not only blew dust and sand over me, they also roused that secret and instinctive faith as well. By and by the wind grew stronger. Now when the wind blows through a skull, a sound very much like a sigh is produced. In a few minutes I became the centre of sighings without number from all sides, to my right and left, in front and behind. It seemed as if hundreds of men surrounded me, sighing and sighing in helpless despair. An uncomfortable, uncanny feeling took possession of me and twice I shuddered convulsively. The young vulture was still sobbing behind me and now it seemed to moan with redoubled force. I realized that I was on the verge of hysteria and that, unless I could control myself, death itself might overtake me in those grim surroundings. I had never before come to such a terrible place alone. He who could come here alone without a tremor of fear was Indra, and not I. I had accompanied him to many dreadful places, and so had thought that I too could go anywhere with cool head and undaunted heart. But now I could plainly see that what I had thought was courage had been mere hot-headed vanity. Did I possess his unflinching breast or his unswerving conviction or his irresistible armour of faith in the efficacy of Rama's name? It was Indra, and not I, who could stand alone on this dreadful plain and see the spirits play with human skulls. I felt that it would be a relief to see even a live tiger or bear. Suddenly I felt a breath on my right ear breathed by somebody behind me : it was so cold a breath that it seemed to congeal into frost. Without turning my head, I seemed to see plainly that the nostrils through which this breath had issued had no skin or flesh, not even a

drop of blood : they were a bony cavern. In front of me, behind, to the right and to the left of me, darkness reigned : the still, silent night palpitated with the breath of desolation. The moans and sighs of despair seemed to be closing in upon me from all sides. And the cold, frosty breath on my ear would not stop or cease. It was this that did most to break my nerve. It seemed to me that all the cold blasts of the spirit-world were blowing on me through that bony cavern near my ear.

Throughout all these events I had clung to the idea that it would be fatal to lose consciousness, and that its loss would mean death. I found that my right leg was trembling visibly : I tried to keep it still, but without success; it appeared to be someone else's. Just then I heard several voices crying from far away, 'Babu-ji ! Babu-sab !'¹ My hair stood on end. Who were these? Again I heard a cry, 'Please do not shoot !' This time the voices were nearer, and, without moving my head, I could see out of the corner of my eye a faint streak of light. One of the voices seemed to be that of Ratan, and a little later I perceived that it was really he. Advancing a little further, he stood behind a silk-cotton tree and shouted, 'Sir, wherever you may be, please don't shoot ! We are Ratan.'² One could tell by his grammar that Ratan was really a barber by caste.

1. *Babu-ji* and *Babu-sab* may be rendered by 'Sir' or 'Your honour'. *Babu* is the honorific title prefixed to names in Bengal and Bihar; *ji* is an honorific suffix. *Babu-ji* is also used alone, in addressing a person respectfully. *Sab*, a contraction for *Sabib*, meaning 'master' or 'gentleman', is also used as an honorific suffix here.

2. 'We are Ratan', is characteristic of this caste's indifference to grammar.

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In my joy I tried to respond by a shout, but no voice came out of my throat. There is a saying that when spirits leave a place, they signalise their departure by breaking something or other. He who stood behind me must have broken my voice when he left.

Ratan and three other men came up to me with big sticks in their hands and two lanterns. One of the three was Chhattulal who played Piari's accompaniment on the *tabla*,¹ another was Piari's door-keeper. The third was the village watchman.

'Come with us, sir,' said Ratan ; 'it is nearly three.'

'All right,' I said, and began to walk back with them.

'What grand courage you have shown, sir!' exclaimed Ratan. 'We can't tell you how afraid we were to come.'

'But what made you come ?'

'Greed, sir, love of money,' Ratan replied. 'Each of us has got a month's pay to-night, sir.' He came up close to me and added in a lower voice, 'When you went away, sir, I went to my mistress and saw that she was crying. "Ratan," she said, "what shall I do ? I will give you a month's pay : you must all follow him !" I answered, "I can take Chhattulal and Ganesh with me, madam, but none of us know the way." Just then we heard the watchman's cry, and she said, "Call him here, Ratan ; he is sure to know the way." I went out and called him in. He got six rupees and consented to show us the way. Did you hear the cry of a baby, sir ?' and Ratan shivered visibly and clutched the tail of my coat. 'Our Ganesh Pande is a Brahmin,' he said, 'and that's why we have been saved to-night. Otherwise—'

1. A small tambourine.

I said nothing. I was not in a condition to protest or to correct anybody. I walked as one dazed or hypnotized, in absolute silence.

After a few minutes Ratan asked, 'Did you see anything to-night, sir?'

'No,' I answered.

This curt reply evidently perplexed Ratan, and he asked, 'Are you angry with us, sir, because we came? If you had only seen her weep—'

'No,' I said hurriedly, 'no, Ratan, I am not angry in the least.'

When we reached our encampment, the watchman went away, and Ganesh and Chhattulal went to the servants' tent. Ratan said to me, 'Mother¹ has requested you to see her before you go.'

I paused. I seemed to see Piari plainly, sitting in the lamplight, anxiously waiting for me, with tears in her eyes. My whole soul rushed madly to meet her.

'Come, sir,' said Ratan with respectful entreaty. I closed my eyes for an instant to steady myself. I realized that I was not in a normal frame of mind. All my faculties had suddenly become intoxicated as with some exquisite wine. Could I, with this ecstasy in my heart, visit her tent at such an hour? No, I could not.

'Why are you standing there in the darkness, sir?' asked Ratan, perplexed at my indecision. 'Please come this way.'

'No, Ratan,' I said hurriedly, 'not now : I am going.'

1. 'Mother': this is how a servant often speaks of his mistress.

Srikanta

‘But Mother is waiting,’ said Ratan, evidently aggrieved, ‘she is awaiting your return.’

‘Awaiting me ? Tender her a thousand compliments, and tell her that I will see her before I go away to-morrow. I cannot see her now. I feel extremely sleepy, Ratan ; I am going.’ And, without giving poor Ratan time for a reply, I hurriedly walked off towards my tent.

IX

WHEN I see men assume the seat of judges instead of leaving all judgment to the Supreme, I am filled with shame. Read the writings of the critics and you will find a good deal to laugh over. One would think that their acquaintance with the characters of a book was more intimate than that of the author himself. 'There is no consistency,' they declare in accents which compel conviction, 'in the delineation of this man's character; and as for the other man, he never could have acted thus.' And the readers say, 'How fine! This is criticism: this is analysis of character. How dare any one write rubbish and balderdash when the lash of such a critic hangs over him? See now how he has pulled that book to pieces!' I dare say the book has its faults: what earthly thing has not? But when I contemplate my own life, such assurance about others' lives fills me with infinite pity and humility. 'Alas for the human heart!' I say to myself. 'Is it a mere phrase that the soul of man is infinite? How can we ever forget that millions of births, and countless millions of experiences in each birth, may lie submerged under the surface of this limitless mind, and that the emergence of any one of them into our life may set at naught all our experience, all education, and all this unerring skill in the analysis of character? And how can we forget too that the heart of man is the seat of his eternal soul?'

Srikanta

Take the case of Annada Didi. I can never forget her sweet face, angelic in its calm. After she had left us few nights went by when I did not sob myself to sleep. How often I cried, 'Didi, I have no more fear for myself: I am saved. By the alchemy of your touch all that was base in me has been turned to gold. Now nothing in me can rust by exposure to the changing weather of circumstances: the gold will remain bright and glittering to the end. But you are gone, my Didi, and no one can share in this good fortune of mine, for no one else has seen you as I have done. If others had known you, my Didi, as well as I have done, their nature, I have little doubt, would have been transmuted into an exceeding goodness.' My imagination busied itself at that tender age with conceiving a thousand ways in which I could have saved the world by sharing my Didi with it. Sometimes I would think that if I could get seven big pots of gold I would place her, like Devi Choadhurani,¹ on an enormous throne: I would clear forests and make an open space, and call people together, and they would be her subjects. Sometimes I would think of the great possibilities of putting her into a big house-boat which would be taken from one country to another, a big, magnificent band playing to announce her greatness. Thus in a day I would build a thousand castles in the air, castles that seem fantastic enough at this distance, the memories of which in these sober days bring smiles, and tears as well.

I had a conviction in those days as solid and massive as the Himalayas, that there certainly never existed in this world, and could hardly exist in any other world, the woman who could win my heart. 'If I ever meet any

1. Devi Choadhurani: the heroine in Bankimchandra Chatterji's novel of the same name.

one,' so ran my dreams, 'who speaks with her soft voice, whose lips possess the cool sweetness of her smile, whose brow like hers is radiant with angelic light, whose eyes have her tender appeal, I shall know that she is the one destined to share my life. May she be as loving and as devoted as my Didi! May all her actions, like my Didi's, shine with the sublime splendour of a wonderful soul! May she accept and prize me above and beyond all happiness and misery, all good and evil, and all right and wrong, in this life!'

Was this the same person whose first waking thought now was of someone else's words, whose fancy dwelt on a face as different from Didi's as night is from day? Only six days before if my Genius had come and warned me of such a contingency, I should have laughed in his face and said, 'Great All-knower, thanks for thy good wishes! You need not trouble yourself about my happiness. My heart knows what true gold is, and I will never be taken in by brass, however glittering.'

And yet brass did come in all its glory. There in the innermost chamber of my heart where my Annada Didi's blessings had been a shower of purest gold, some unforeseen influence made me clutch at this brass.

I plainly see that those of my critics who cannot brook any weakness are getting impatient: they will say, 'What is it that you wish to say in such tortuous language, after all? Why not out with it at once? It is this,—that on waking that morning you found your mind irresistibly calling up the image of Piari's face, that you found a longing for the very person whom at first you had contemptuously sought to brush aside, isn't that so? Well, if that is all, don't bring Annada Didi's name into the

matter. Because however well you may know the art of dressing up your stories, we are not human beings. We can emphatically assert that the force of her first character could never have been present in your mind; for if it had been, this long confession would not have obtained a fourth of there.'

I dare say. But no more argument. I have learned that man never completely understands himself. I know under the influence of what I have been 'para-ing' my thoughts about villainy and sin when, on reading this history, people declare that Srilanta is a lying up and a hypocrite. I must confess that my lessons. I have never consciously practised hypocrisy. My only fault has been that I was unaware of the weakness that lay hidden in my character.

'Babu Sahib!' the prince's servant was calling me. I sat up in bed, and he respectfully informed me that the prince and his retinue were eagerly waiting to hear of my adventures of the previous night. I asked him how they had learned of my adventure. 'The doorkeeper to His Highness's tent,' he answered, 'told them. It, that you came back just before dawn.'

As soon as I entered the prince's tent a great commotion arose. A thousand eager questions were levelled at me. The elderly gentleman of the previous night was among those present, and Pini with her attendant was sitting in silence at one side. We did not exchange glances this morning as before; she appeared to be oblivious of my presence.

'All honour to your courage, Srilanta,' said the prince, when the hubbub had subsided. 'When did you reach the cremation-grounds last night?'

'Between midnight and one o'clock, Your Highness.'

'It must have been totally dark then,' said the elderly gentleman. 'The *amavasya*¹ began after half-past eleven.'

Sounds of startled surprise arose. When they had abated, the prince asked, 'And then? What did you see?'

'Countless bones and skulls.'

'What astounding courage is yours, Srikanta! Did you enter the cremation-grounds or did you stand outside?'

'I entered it and sat on a mound of sand,' I answered.

'Well, well, what next? What next? What did you see after you sat down?'

'Vast stretches of sand.'

'Anything else?'

'Clumps of *kashar* shrubs and *simul* trees.'

'Anything else?'

'And the river.'

'Yes, yes, we know all that!' cried the prince, bursting with impatience. 'Well, those things—'

I burst out laughing, and said, 'I saw two bats fly over my head.'

The elderly gentleman then advanced towards me and asked in Hindustani, 'Did you see nothing else, sir?'

'Nothing.'

For a moment the whole tent-ful of people seemed disappointed. Then the elderly gentleman cried out

1. Dark phase of the moon.

Srikanta

angrily, 'It's impossible, sir ! You can't have gone at all !' I merely smiled at his anger, for it was only natural. The prince pressed my hand with his and besought me in a voice of entreaty.

'On your honour, Srikanta, tell us what you really saw.'

'On my honour, I say, I saw nothing else.'

'How long were you there ?'

'About three hours.'

'Well, if you didn't see anything, did you hear anything ?'

'Yes, I heard something.'

In an instant every face brightened, and the crowd closed in around me to hear every word. I told them how a night-bird had passed overhead crying, '*Bap! Bap!*', how the young vultures on the *simul* trees had kept up a plaintive crying like so many sick children, how a sudden gust of wind had risen and I had heard the sighings of the skulls, how at length some mysterious being had breathed icy-cold on my ear. After I had finished no one spoke for some time : there was silence throughout the tent. At length the elderly gentleman heaved a deep sigh, and placing a hand on my shoulder, said with impressive slowness, 'Babu-ji, you have been able to return with your life ; that is because you are a true Brahmin ; nobody else could have done it. But take an old man's warning, sir ; pray do not take such risks again ! I touch the feet of your forefathers a thousand million times ; it is their spiritual merit that saved you last night.' And in his emotion he put his hand on my feet.

I said previously that this man was an expert storyteller. He now began to give an exhibition of his art. With eyes that now blazed, now darkened, with a gaze that seemed at times one glowing fire, and at other times awed us with its impression of horror and mystery, he began such a detailed explanation of my story—the mystery of everything that had happened overnight, from the weeping of the young vultures to the icy-cold breath on my ear—that my hair stood on end even then in broad daylight among so many people. I had not noticed that Piari had approached me silently as on the previous morning. The sound of a quick sigh made me turn my head, and I saw her sitting close behind me, staring at the speaker. Down her cheeks which were bright with animation two tears had coursed unnoticed, leaving a path that had become dry. She was all unconscious of my swift glance and of the picture that she made, with her vivid, tear-stained face eagerly lifted to the speaker, but the picture was stamped on my heart for ever in lines of fire. When the narrative was ended, she stood up and, asking with a bow the prince's permission to go, left the tent slowly and in silence.

I had intended to go in the morning, but as I was not feeling quite well, and had been requested by the prince to stay, I decided to go in the afternoon. I returned to my tent, pondering over the change in Piari's attitude towards me. Hitherto she had mocked and laughed at me, she had even made me feel the suggestion of a quarrel gathering in the look of her eyes ; but such indifference—it was altogether new. And yet I was pleased rather than pained. Though it had never been my business to worry about the inner workings of a young woman's mind, and I had never done so, yet perhaps the varied and

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unbroken chain of experience extending throughout my countless births and re-births even unto this life, lying concealed in the recesses of my mind, enabled me to see the inward meaning of her conduct that day. Whatever the cause of my intuition, I did not need to be told that her attitude was not really one of indifference but rather the silent remonstrance of secret love. Perhaps it was a suspicion of this that had made me omit from my story, as I told it to the prince, the fact of her having sent men to the cremation-grounds to look for me. She had left the tent in the silence at the end of my story. It was a silent accusation. I had not told her, when I returned at dawn, anything of what had happened. What she had had the exclusive right to hear first, she had heard from her remote seat, behind all the others, as it were by accident. This silent accusation of love tasted so sweet, so exquisite a thing, to my unaccustomed experience, that I retired into solitude like a child who has found an entrancing piece of confection, to suck the very marrow of its sweetness.

I should have gone to sleep in the afternoon, I even began to feel drowsy, but the hope that Ratan would come continually broke in upon thoughts of slumber and dispelled them. The day lengthened, but Ratan did not come. I had been so confident of his coming, that when at last I rose and saw that the afternoon was far advanced, I could not resist the conclusion that he had come and gone back, thinking me asleep. Silly ass ! if he had come, would he not have called me ? The feeling that the silent hours of the afternoon had gone for naught worried me, but I felt little doubt that he would come again after dusk, perhaps with a request, or a note, or something which he would slip into my hand. But how

was I to pass the time until then ? Looking ahead I saw at a distance a glistening expanse of water. It was a tank or artificial lake, the work of a forgotten zamindar, about a mile in length. One side of it, to the north, had become filled up and was overgrown with a dense jungle. The womenfolk of the village did not dare to come to this tank to fetch water on account of its distance from the village. There was an old *ghat*, a flight of steps leading down to the water ; I went and sat down listlessly on a corner of it. Rumour had it that once upon a time there had been a flourishing village round the lake, and that, devastated by cholera and the plague, it had shifted to its present site. On all sides I could see signs of past habitations. The slanting rays of the setting sun lingered on the dark surface of the water and made it liquid gold, while I sat gazing in silence.

Slowly the sun went down, and the dark water took on a deeper shade. From the adjoining jungle a thirsty jackal came out to the edge of the water, quenched its thirst, and then stole timidly back. It was time for me to get up. The time I had meant to idle away here had passed by, yet for some mysterious reason I felt I could not leave the place : I sat rooted to that flight of steps as if bound by a spell.

How many persons, I thought, had passed and re-passed, stepped and re-stepped over the spot on which I was sitting ! How often they had come down this flight of steps to bathe, to wash their clothes, to take water. To what invisible lake did they now resort for these daily wants of theirs ? They would come about this time of the evening, and sit on these steps ; and many a song and story would soothe and enliven their weariness after the labour of the day. And then, when all on a sudden

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death came in the guise of the great plague and snatched away the whole village from life, many dying souls, perhaps, had come with hurrying feet, impelled by thirst, to breathe their last on these steps. Perhaps their thirsty spirits were still hovering about me. For who could say with assurance that things we do not see do not exist? 'Babuji,' the old man had said that very morning, 'never believe that nothing is left of us after death, or that dead souls do not wander about helplessly in space, goaded on by desires and appetites, pleasure and pain, like ourselves.' He had told us stories of King Vikramaditya,¹ of how one can command powerful spirits like *Tal-Veatl*, and of the magical powers of the *Sadhus* and *Sannyasis*² who practise *Tantric*³ rites. 'Never think, Babuji,' he had concluded, 'that they do not make themselves seen and heard when suitable occasion arises. I solemnly advise you never to go again to those cremation-grounds. And never disbelieve, I pray you, that those who take pains to acquire powers in the unseen world have their reward and recompense some day.'

Those words, which in daylight had been but a matter for jest and laughter, came back to me in the gathering darkness with another aspect. If there was anything real in the world, I thought, it was certainly death. The

1. Vikramaditya stories: these stories are full of supernatural incidents, spirits, demons, celestial nymphs, the power of magic and austerities, and the like Vikramaditya is a semi-legendary king.

2. *Sadhus* and *Sannyasis* are persons who have renounced the world.

3. *Tantric* rites are rites prescribed by the *tantras* or books that deal with the development of occult powers. They represent the darkest side of the worship of Kali as *Shakti* or 'strength'.

manifold forms of good and evil, pleasure and pain, in our life, were they not like the different materials out of which fireworks are made? They were collected and disposed carefully and skilfully with the sole object of being burnt to ashes some day. If then one could learn what lay on the other side of death, what, indeed, could be more profitable? It mattered little who gave us the news and in what form it came.

Suddenly my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps. I turned my head, but saw nothing except the darkness. There was nobody within sight. Shaking off my lethargy, I stood up and started, as I thought, in the direction of our encampment. I laughed as I remembered the incidents of the previous night and said to myself, 'No, no more sitting in the dark. Last night I felt a breath on my right ear; and now if the owner of the breath comes with designs on my left,—well, I shall hardly be in a condition to relish the joke!'

I had no idea how long I had been sitting by the lake, or what hour of the night it was: perhaps it was midnight. But what was this? I walked and walked, and yet the narrow footpath led on interminably. I could not see even a single light from our tents. For some time I had noticed a clump of bamboos in front of me, obstructing my view. 'Why,' I thought suddenly, 'I did not notice that when I came down. Have I lost my way?' Advancing a little further, I saw that it was not a clump of bamboos after all, but a few tamarind trees whose wide-spread branches, closely intertwined, deepened the gloom through which my path pursued its zigzag course. Under those trees it was so dark that I could not see my own hand. My heart began to beat fast. 'Where am I going?' I asked myself. Summoning up my courage,

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I passed under the giant tamarind tree. Imagine my surprise when I saw nothing but the dark expanse of the heavens confronting me. But what was that high ridge up there ? Could it be the embankment which the government had constructed along the river ? Ah yes, that was it ! My feet were weighted down with an overpowering weariness but I dragged myself somehow to the top of the embankment. Just what I had thought ! Below me were the vast cremation-grounds. Again I heard footsteps. This time they passed before me and lost themselves in the grey desolation below. Half-bereft of my senses, reeling and stumbling, I dropped down on the sand and gravel of the embankment. I had no longer the least doubt in my mind that someone was trying to show me the way through these cremation-grounds to others beyond them, and that my invisible guide, the sound of whose footsteps had made me move from the lake, had just left me, for I seemed to hear the echo of his footfall still vibrating in the air.

X

I HAVE passed the age at which one is anxious to account for every event. I am therefore not ashamed to admit that I do not possess sufficient knowledge to explain how, on that dark night, I could come from the ancient lake to the borders of the cremation-grounds, or whose footsteps they were that lured me thus out of my proper path. Even to-day these incidents are wrapped in mystery. But my admission must not be regarded as the admission of a belief in the existence of spirits. I remember a lunatic who lived in our village ; he used to beg for his meals from house to house by day ; at night he would take a small ladder and, covering it with a piece of cloth, would hold it on high and hover about in wayside gardens in the shadow of the trees. He frightened countless people out of their senses by this foolish masquerading of his. He could have no personal interest in it, and yet his intellect was never so active as in devising a hundred new means of frightening innocent people. He would tie dry faggots to a branch of a tree and set fire to them ; he would smear his face over with soot and ink, and, climbing up to the roof of a temple, sit there in that state for hours ; late at night he would creep close to the houses of poor peasants and call out their names in an unearthly voice. And yet he was never caught at these tricks. From his conduct during the day it was impossible for anyone to suspect him of the grim jests which he perpetrated at night, not only in our village but in a number

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of neighbouring villages also. He confessed his diabolical humour before his death ; and all those terror-inspiring manifestations of the occult ceased with his life. Perhaps, in my own case also, some such explanation was possible.

When I sank half-unconscious on the dusty embankment, the sound of footsteps advanced into the centre of the cremation-grounds and then faded into the empty air. The echoes seemed to say, ' Oh, fie ! Why are you sitting there ? Was it for this that we brought you so far ? Come on into the midst of us ! Do not sit there like an outcaste, come and sit with us as one of ourselves.' I cannot be sure whether I really heard those words with my ears or felt them in my inner consciousness, but I knew that I was still in full control of my faculties. My eyes kept gazing ahead, with a fixed, half-wakeful stare. I was as far from the calm of unconsciousness as from the alertness of a mind that is fully awake. I had not forgotten that it was very late and that I had to return to the tent. And I would have made an effort to do so, but for the feeling that everything was so utterly futile. I had not come there of my own free will ; I had never dreamt of coming there again. So he who had brought me there had some special need of me ; and he would not let me return without accomplishing his object. I had heard that no one, once he was in ' their ' power, could escape against ' their ' will ; that, however cunningly you might run away from ' them ', your path turned into a maze, leading you finally, after much wandering, back to your original starting-place.

I therefore thought all restless attempts to break through ' their ' power quite useless, and sat still without making any effort or movement. And then suddenly I saw something which I shall never forget.

For the first time in my life I realized that night has a form and features of its own, apart from the forms and features of trees and hills, earth and water, field and jungle. I saw night, deep, dark, colossal, seated on the widespread world, under the limitless, black sky of midnight, with eyes closed as in mystic meditation, while the whole universe, with closed lips and bated breath, preserved the inviolate calm. Suddenly my eyes saw a flash of palpitating beauty. What liar, I thought, declared that light alone had beauty, and darkness none? When had I ever seen such an inundation of beauty as the darkness that flooded the earth and the heavens, that flowed about, above, below, and within me in an all-enveloping infinitude, as far as my eye could reach, and beyond? The deeper, the more unthinkable, and the more unlimited a thing was, the darker it was. The limitless ocean was dark; and dark were the interiors of forests, impenetrable and full of ancient mysteries. The beauty of darkness belonged to the divine form¹ that dazzled the eyes of Radha and that flooded the world with the fragrance of love. And He who was the support of the universe, the source of light and movement, the Life of all life, and the Soul of beauty, was He not an impenetrable darkness to the eyes of men? Was that because in reality He was dark, or was darkness a synonym for anything incomprehensible, unknowable, and impenetrable? Was that why death and the other world appeared to man's vision as mysterious, black, and unfathomable?

1. Krishna, who is regarded as an incarnation of God, the beloved of Radha, is traditionally regarded as of a dark complexion, while Radha herself, who typifies the human soul aflame with the love of God, is fair.

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Strangely enough, my helpless loneliness in that awe-inspiring place brought me no feeling of terror but the overpowering realisation of joy in the mystic beauty of the dark universe. I felt that I had never before seen so much beauty in the formless gloom that filled all space. Perhaps, then, Death too was not horrid or ugly because of his darkness. When he came one day, perhaps I should discover him as beautiful and as profound as the night. 'And if,' I thought, 'to-night is destined to be the time of our meeting together, face to face, then, O dark immensity ! O sounding footsteps leading me onward ! O thou infinite beauty wiping away all my sorrow and fear and pain by thy magic touch ! fill all my body and soul with primeval nescience, and when I have greeted Death with a heart purged of all fear at this gateway of his temple, so dark, austere, and solemn, let me follow him with triumphal gladness to the end.' And then I thought suddenly, 'Why did I not obey the silent call of my guide ? Why am I sitting here like a wretched outcaste ? Why should I not go on ?'

I went down and sat in the very centre of the vast cremation-grounds. I cannot say now how long I was there, but I sat still, as in a trance, half-unconscious. When I came back to my normal self I found that the darkness had thinned out, and that a part of the sky close to where the morning star glowed and glimmered was suffused with pale light. I heard faint sounds as of low voices in conversation. Looking in their direction I saw what seemed to be a small party of people coming towards me along the embankment. They were still at some distance and were half-concealed by a large silk-cotton tree. They were carrying two or three lanterns which swung to and fro with their movements. Climbing the

embankment I saw that the party consisted of two covered bullock-carts and five or six men on foot. They were evidently going towards the railway-station.

I felt that I ought to keep out of their sight, for, however intelligent they might be, if they saw me standing alone there, like a veritable ghost, at that hour of the night, they would at least make a terrible uproar, if nothing more.

I came back and stood in my original place. A few minutes later the little company passed by along the embankment just above me. I thought at first that I had been detected, for one of the foremost men stood looking towards me for several seconds and then spoke to someone in the first bullock-cart, but they proceeded almost immediately and were soon lost to sight behind a bushy tree. Feeling that the night was almost over, I was making up my mind to return when a loud voice came from behind the tree. 'Srikanta Babu!'

'Hallo,' I cried. 'Is that Ratan?'

'Yes, sir. Please come this way, sir.'

Quickly mounting the embankment, I asked, 'Ratan, are you going home?'

'Yes, sir,' he answered, 'we're going home : and Mother is in the first cart.'

As I approached the cart, Piari looked out through the curtains and said, 'I knew that it could not be anybody else as soon as the *durwan*¹ described what he saw. Come up into the cart ; I have something to tell you'.

'What is it?' I asked, going nearer.

1. Doorkeeper. Of course, all her servants travelled with her.

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'Get in, please, and I will tell you,' said Piari.

'No, I can't ; there is no time. I must reach my tent before daybreak.'

Piari put her head out and suddenly catching hold of my right hand said in a voice of earnest entreaty, 'Don't make a scene before the servants, I beg. Won't you get in ?'

Somewhat taken aback by her unusual excitement, I climbed into the cart and sat down. Telling the driver to proceed, she asked, 'Why did you come here again to-night ?'

With perfect sincerity I answered, 'I do not know.' Piari was still holding my hand. 'You don't know ?' she said. 'Very well. But why did you come without telling any one ?'

'It is true,' I said, 'nobody knows of my coming here, but I did not conceal it intentionally from any one.'

'I don't believe it.'

'It's the truth.'

'What do you mean, then ?'

'Will you believe me if I tell you what I mean ? I did not conceal anything from any one, nor did I wish to come here again.'

'Then,' said Piari derisively, 'perhaps you will say that you were spirited away through the empty air and found yourself here ?'

'No,' I answered, 'no one spirited me away through the air. I came here on foot. But I can't say why I came and when.' Piari was silent.

'I don't know, Rajlakshmi,' I said, 'whether you will believe me, but the real story is somewhat strange', and I related to her all that had happened to me. While she was listening I felt, more than once, a tremor run through the hand that lay in mine, but she said not a word. The curtain was raised, and, looking out, I saw that the sky had grown clear. 'I must go now,' I said.

'No' said Piari, and her voice sounded hollow as if she were lost in a trance.

'What do you mean, Piari? Do you know what my going away like this will mean?'

'I know, I know : but these people are not your guardians, that they can force you to lose your life to save your reputation.' She dropped my hand and, seizing my feet, cried out in an agonised tone, 'Kanta-da,¹ you won't live if you go back to that place. I don't want you to go with me, but I can't let you go back there either. I will buy you your railway ticket. Go home or anywhere else you like, but don't think of staying there a minute longer.'

'But what about my things?' I asked.

'No matter,' said Piari. 'They will send them back to you, if they like. If they don't, they're not so very valuable, after all, are they?'

'That's true,' I admitted; 'they're not of any great value. But the false rumours that will arise, what of them?'

1. Kanta, for Srikanta. *Da* is a suffix meaning 'brother'. It will be remembered that Piari, when a mere girl, knew Srikanta in his boyhood. 'Kanta-da' is the appellation by which she used to call him then : girls in a village often call their boy comrades, senior in age, brothers in this fashion. Here the tenderness that suddenly rises up in Piari's heart is a resurrection of the old simple tenderness of childhood.

Piari let go of my feet and sat silent. Just then the cart turned a corner and I could see the eastern sky that had been behind us. It bore a striking resemblance to the face of this fallen woman. In both I saw the suggestion of a mass of hidden flame struggling through the darkness.

'Why are you silent?' I asked.

Piari smiled a faint, sad smile, and said, 'Kanta-da, it is difficult to write out a deed of gift with the pen which one has used all one's life to make forgeries. So you want to go? Very well then, go. But promise me that you'll leave that place before noon to-day.'

'I promise.'

'Promise that no entreaty of anybody's will keep you there to-night.'

'No, it won't.'

Piari took off her ring and, placing it near my feet, touched the ground with her forehead; then, taking the dust of my feet, she put it on her head and dropped the ring into my pocket.¹ 'Go then,' she said: 'your walk will be longer by about three miles.'

I got down from the cart. The day had completely dawned. 'One more thing,' Piari entreated me. 'When you return home write to me.'

I promised to write, and left her. Not once did I turn back my head to see whether they were still standing or had started forward. But for a long time I could feel her tear-dimmed eyes following me.

1. The ceremony of obeisance is observed when one is parting, for some long time to come, from one to whom respect is due, such as one's senior in age or relationship.

It was eight o'clock when I reached our encampment. As I passed Piari's vacant tent and noticed the scattered remnants of things that lay about it, a futile feeling of desolation rose in my heart. I turned my face away and entered my tent.

Purushottam, one of the servants, said, ' You went out very early, sir, for your walk.'

I did not care to reply and, flinging myself on my bed, closed my eyes.

XI

I WROTE a letter to Piari just to tell her that I had kept my promise. I got her reply in a few days. One thing I had noticed all along: not only had Piari never urged me to come to her house at Patna, she had never even suggested it. Not even in her letter was there a hint of any such invitation.

There was however, at the end, a request that I have not yet forgotten. It was a request that I might remember her in my days of trouble, if not in those of happiness.

Days passed on and Piari's memory grew dim and almost faded away. But I noticed a strange thing at times: after my return from the *shikar* my mind was distracted and ill at ease; a sense of bereavement numbed me and weighed me down.

At last there came a night when I lay tired and listless on my bed. It was the night of the *Holi*¹ festival. I had just come home from it worn out and exhausted, and had not yet washed the red powder out of my hair. A window by my side was open, and I lay looking through the chinks in a *pipal* tree at the moonlight that flooded the heavens. That is all that I remember of that night. I do not remember why I went straight to the station, bought a ticket for Patna, and got into the train. The night passed, and when on the next day I woke up to the fact that we

1. *Holi*: this is the spring festival during which people throw red powder on each other.

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had arrived at Barh, quite close to Patna, I left the train at once. Putting my hand into my pocket I found that there was not the least cause for anxiety, for I had a two-anna piece and two pice.¹ Pleased with the discovery, I sallied forth in search of a shop. I found one and soon spent half of my funds in making an excellent meal of flattened rice, curds, and sugar. Nor did I grieve at my extravagance : one has sometimes to be extravagant in life, and it is cowardly to feel sorry for it.

I set out on a walk through the village. Within an hour I realized that, in spite of my sumptuous repast, I was as hungry as if I had fasted for a week or two. I had just vowed that no decent man could live in such an impossible place, when suddenly I noticed smoke issuing from a mango-grove not far from me. 'Where there is smoke, there is fire,' I reasoned ; 'and where there is fire, there is a pot set on to boil', and I made for the grove.

Splendid ! whoever could have thought it ! It was a real *sannyasi's ashram*.² Water for tea was being heated in a big metal pot over a fire. The *Baba*³ was sitting before it with half-closed eyes ; around him lay the paraphernalia of *ganja*-smoking. A young *sannyasi* was milking a she-goat ; the milk would be useful for the tea. A pair of camels, a couple of ponies, and a cow with her

1. One anna is, roughly speaking, equivalent to a penny, and a pice to one farthing.

2. *Ashram*: a mendicant ascetic's 'asylum' or temporary camp. The *sannyasi* was of course a charlatan, as so many of the wandering mendicants in India are.

3. *Baba*: a *sannyasi* is often called this in Northern India; it means 'father'.

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calf had been tethered to the branches of a tree. Close by was a small tent. Peeping inside, I saw a disciple of about my own age holding a stone mortar between his feet and preparing *bhāṅg*¹ in it with a big pestle. The holy scene opened the flood-gates of my devotion, and in the twinkling of an eye I lay prostrate at the feet of the *Baba*. Taking the dust of his feet on my head, I thought, 'How infinite is Thy mercy, O God! To what a place hast Thou brought me! Let *Piari* go to perdition! If I ever leave this spot which is the very gate-way to salvation, may I never find a resting place even in everlasting hell!'

'Son,' asked the *sadhu*, 'what has brought thee here?'

'I have left my home,' I said meekly, 'a child in ignorance, a wretch that seeks the path to salvation. Grant me the privilege of waiting on your august feet.'

The *sadhu* smiled, and nodded two or three times; then he said briefly in Hindi, 'Son, go back home: the Path is most difficult.'

'*Baba*,' I replied in a voice of supplication, 'in the *Mchabharata*² it is written that the great sinners, Jagai and Madhai, attained to heaven by holding the feet of Vashistha, the mighty ascetic; and should I not also get salvation through the virtue of your lotus-feet? A voice within me says I must.'

The *sadhu* was evidently pleased, and said, 'What thou sayest is true. Very well, my son, if God Rama so wills it,

1. *Bhāṅg* is another intoxicant.

2. *Mahabharata*: there is no such story in the *Mahabharata*. It was Chaitanya, the religious reformer of mediæval Bengal, that converted two scoundrels named Jagai and Madhai. The fact that the *sadhu* swallowed this story as true shows the extent of his knowledge.

so let it be'. The disciple who had been milking the she-goat now prepared tea and offered it to the *Baba*. After he had had his tea, we took the holy leavings.¹

The *bhang* was still in course of preparation for the evening. As it was yet daylight, the *Baba* bethought himself of bliss² of a different nature, and directed a second disciple's attention to the *ganja*-pipe, giving special instructions so that there might be no unnecessary delay.

Half an hour passed. The omniscient *Baba* was highly pleased with me and said, 'Yes, my son, I find many virtuous qualities in thy nature. Thou art fit to be my disciple.'

In the excess of my joy I conveyed the dust of his feet a second time to my head.

Next day, on my coming back to the *ashram* from my bath, I found that, through the grace of my *guru*,³ I lacked nothing. The head disciple brought out a brand new suit of *gerua*⁴ clothes, about a dozen rosaries, strings of *rudraksha*⁵ beads, large and small, and a pair of brass armlets. After donning the spiritual garb, I took some ashes from the *dhuni*, the sacred fire which burnt night and day in our camp, and smeared my face and head with

1. Holy leavings : called *prasad*, or grace : it is the privilege of a disciple to get his master's leavings which are considered sacred.

2. Bliss (*Ananda*) is a word that bulks largely in the vocabulary of the *saunyasis* ; and their disciples often use euphemistic words of this nature to cover the vices of their masters. It is a word borrowed from the Vedanta philosophy.

3. *Guru*: the appellation applied by disciples to their spiritual masters.

4. *Gerua*: coloured with red ochre.

5. *Rudraksha*: a kind of dried berry.

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them. '*Babaji*,' I asked this head disciple with a wink, 'is there any mirror ? I am consumed with a longing to see what I look like now.' The *Babaji* was not dead to all sense of humour. With an air of profound gravity he replied, 'There is one.'

'Then bring it to me.'

I took the mirror and went behind a tree. It was a small mirror with a tin frame, the kind up-country barbers give their customers to hold while they shave them. Though small, it had been kept clean by constant use. I could scarcely restrain my laughter when I saw my transformed appearance. Who would ever imagine that I was the Srikanta who only a few days before had sat listening to the songs of the *baiji* in the company of princes and their satellites !

An hour later I was taken before the *guru* for my initiation into the monastic order. He expressed himself highly pleased with my make-up, and said, 'Son, wait for a month or so.'

'So be it,' I said to myself and, taking the dust of his feet, sat down beside him with folded hands, in an attitude of devotion.

In the course of the evening dissertation he gave me many profound and precious words of advice in spiritual matters. He dwelt in turn on the difficulty of understanding them aright ; the deep repugnance one must feel towards the world ; the austerities that lead to spiritual realisation ; the manifold ways in which the latter-day hypocrites and charlatans desecrate the path of spirituality ; its elaborate history ; the essentials for fixing the mind on the lotus-feet of God ; the wonderful assistance rendered by inhaling the smoke of a certain dried plant.

The Sadhu

All these things he explained to me, and he also encouraged me by hinting that in the perfect performance of the last-named rite I showed myself an apt and promising pupil. Thus, after learning many a secret of the path to salvation, I became permanently attached to the *Guru Maharaja's* train as his third disciple.

In order to evoke in us deep repugnance to the world and to help us in our spiritual exercises, our *guru* made arrangements for us that were particularly austere. Tea, bread, clarified butter, milk, curds, flattened rice, sugar, and other similarly ascetic dishes were presented for our diet. Besides this, our vigilance was untiring to see that our minds never slipped from the contemplation of the lotus-feet of God. The result of all this was that, as we say, even my dried twigs blossomed : I began to develop a sleek and dignified rotundity quite different from the slimness of my sinful past.

One task we had, to go out begging. Though not the prime duty of *sannyasis*, it is always a very important duty, because it has an intimate connection with the spiritual dietary. *Maharaj* never did it himself ; we, his disciples, did it for him by turns. In all the other duties of *sannyasis* I quickly outdistanced the other disciples ; but in this alone I failed to shine. I never succeeded in making it natural or pleasant. But there was one advantage : the country was Bihar and not Bengal. I am not comparing the merits of the two. All I want to say is that there the women never advised me, as they would have done in Bengal, to seek the next house, on the ground that their hands were dirty or that they were otherwise engaged ; nor did the men demand the reason why, being an able-bodied man, I went about begging.

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Everyone, whether rich or poor, gave us alms, and none turned us away. Thus passed some fifteen days in the shadow of the mango-grove. There was little trouble during the day, but at night mosquito-bites greatly weakened my desire for salvation, indeed sometimes made it disappear altogether. I realized that it would be impossible for me to persist in the course I had chosen unless my skin could be thickened. However superior a Bengali may be in other respects, one must admit that the up-country skin is more helpful than the Bengali skin in the attainment of salvation. One day, after returning from my bath, I was proceeding towards my spiritual breakfast, when the *Guru Maharaj* sang out,

‘Saint Bharadwaj at Prayag hath his seat :

Most dear to him are Rama’s sacred feet.’

In other words, ‘Strike the tent : we are going to Prayag.’ But it was no easy matter striking a *sannyasi*’s tent. The whole morning was spent in finding the pony which had been roaming all over the place in search of food, loading him with a part of our belongings, fixing the *Maharaj*’s saddle on the camel, collecting our cattle and goats, and tying up our bundles and arranging for their transport. After all this we started, and, after a journey of four miles, reached a huge banyan tree at one end of a village named Vithoura. As evening was coming on, we decided to camp under the tree. It was a beautiful place, and our *Maharaj* expressed his approval. It was satisfactory to know that he was pleased, but I could not imagine how many births it would take us to reach Bharadwaj *Muni*¹ at this rate of progress.

1. A sage or saint.

The Sadhu

An incident that occurred here is perhaps responsible for my remembering the name of the village to this day. It was a 'full-moon' day.¹ All three of us, by our *guru's* orders, had gone out to beg, each one in a different direction. If I had been the only one out begging I should probably have made greater efforts than I did, but as our meal was not dependent on my unaided efforts I merely did a great deal of aimless wandering. Suddenly I caught a glimpse, through the open door of a house, of the figure of a Bengali girl. Though the cloth she was wearing was evidently from an Indian loom² and very coarse in texture, the way she had draped it³ excited my special interest. We had been five or six days in the village and I had been to most of the houses, but as yet I had seen no Bengali, male or female. *Sannyasis* have the right of free entry everywhere. As soon as I entered the house, the girl began to look intently at me. I can remember her face even to-day : for I do not remember to have seen so piteous, so sad and despairing a look on the face of any other girl of ten or eleven. Hopeless grief and despair were expressed in her dark eyes and in every line of her little figure. I asked straight-away in Bengali, 'Won't you give me some alms, little mother ?' She said nothing at first : then her lips trembled and twitched several times, and she burst into tears.

1. Full-moon day: a day on the evening of which the full-moon would rise ; a day of peculiar sanctity to Hindus, when the alms collected would be expected to exceed in quantity those collected on other days.

2. Indian loom: most Bengalis wear cloth imported from Lancashire, especially the poorer people.

3. In different parts of India women drape their *saris* differently.

I felt a little abashed. Though there was no one near us, I could hear voices of Bihari women from the adjoining room. If one of them should come out, what would she think of the scene? Before I could decide whether I should go or stay, the sobbing girl asked me a thousand questions in one breath, 'Where do you come from? Where do you live? Do you live in Burdwan district? When are you going back? Do you know Rajpur? Do you know Gauri Tewari of that village?'

I asked, 'Is your home at Rajpur in Burdwan district?' She wiped her tears with her hand as she answered, 'Yes, my father is Gauri Tewari and my brother's name is Ramlal Tewari. Do you know them? I have been here in my husband's house for three months now, and I have never had a word from them. Oh, how I long to know how they all are, father and mother, and my brother, and Giribala, and Khoka.¹ You see that *pipal* tree; my sister's husband's house is just there. She hanged herself last Monday, and the people say, "No, she died of cholera."'

I was dumbfounded. What was the matter? The people with whom the girl was living were natives of Bihar, while she was pure Bengali. How could this be her husband's house, so far out of Bengal? 'Why did your sister commit suicide?' I asked her. 'She used to cry night and day to go back to Rajpur,' she said; 'she neither ate nor slept. To punish her they kept her standing day and night by tying her hair to a beam in the ceiling. So she hanged herself.'

'Are your husband's people Biharis?' I asked.

1. 'Baby'.

'Yes,' she said, bursting into tears again, 'I can't understand their speech and can't eat their food, and I cry day and night. But Father never writes to me, and he doesn't take me away from here.'

'Why did your father marry you into a family which lived so far away and whose language you do not know?'

'We are Tewaris, ¹ you know,' she explained. 'We can't find anybody to marry us in Bengal.'

'Do these people beat you?'

'Don't they? Look at this.' Sobbing convulsively, she showed me welts on her arms, her back, and her cheeks. 'I shall kill myself like my sister.'

My eyes too had grown wet. I went out without asking further questions and without waiting for my alms. The girl however followed me, saying, 'Won't you tell my father? Tell him to take me away or I shall—' I nodded assent and strode rapidly away. Her heart-rending appeal continued to ring in my ears.

At the turning of the road I saw a grocer's shop. Seeing me enter, the grocer stood up to do me honour. Though he was surprised to hear me ask for paper, pen, and ink, instead of alms, he supplied them. I wrote a letter to Gauri Tewari, describing all that I had learned, not omitting to mention the news that his elder daughter had committed suicide and that the brutal oppression that the younger girl had been subjected to had made her resolve to put an end to her life in a similar manner. Unless he came, I wrote, and did something to relieve her

1. A Brahmin sect, whose home is up-country and not in the Ganges plain.

sufferings; nobody could say what kind of fate was in store for her. I added that it was most likely that her husband's people here did not allow his letters to reach her. I addressed the letter to Rajpur, district Burdwan. I do not know whether it ever reached Gauri Tewari, or, if it reached him, what he did afterwards. But the whole event was so vividly impressed on my mind, that I still remember every detail of it; and I have not yet got over a feeling of revolt against the caste system, with its fine elaborations, which our model Hindu society harbours in its bosom, and which is the cause of horrors like this.

The caste system may be a good thing. There is no doubt that it is responsible for the fact that Hindu society has managed to exist almost unchanged through centuries. No one can doubt its efficacy in keeping our social system alive and intact to this day. It would certainly be madness to think of slackening its rigour simply because two wretched girls, unable to bear their sufferings, chose to commit suicide. But no one who had heard that girl's despairing sobs could resist the question, 'Is mere survival—the preserving intact of a race or system from generation to generation, whatever the cost—the noblest ideal of life?' Many races, tribes, and systems have succeeded in perpetuating themselves, for instance semi-barbaric people like the Kukis, the Kols, the Bhils, and the Sonthals in India; while in the great oceans, on many a small island, small tribes have been living since the dawn of history. There are ancient tribes in Africa and America who have such strict social laws that the mere mention of them would make our blood run cold. In point of age they are older than the oldest ancestors of many European people, they are older than ourselves. But nobody would dream of raising the question whether their social systems

on that account are superior to ours. Social problems do not appear in the mass ; they become apparent in isolated cases, in individual lives. Perhaps such a social problem had perplexed the mind of Gauri Tewari when he had to marry his eleven or twelve years old girls to Bihari bridegrooms. But evidently he had found no solution, and had at length been obliged to sacrifice his two little daughters on the altar of society. I could not feel the slightest pride in a society that could find no room for those two helpless girls. the stiff, paralysed society which had lost its power of extending itself beyond its rigid limits. I once read somewhere the words of a great author to the effect that in the caste system our society offered to the world a solution of a great social problem that had so far been found insoluble outside our country. Such irrational effusions evoke in me repugnance too deep for words : the louder such people proclaim their solutions of 'universal' problems which are products of their own imagination, the more difficult it is for me to answer.

I left the shop. When I returned to our camp after posting my stampless letter at the post-office, my companions had not yet returned from their rounds. I found our *Sadhu Baba* somewhat out of humour. 'This village is rather cold towards *sadhus* and *sannyasis*,' he complained ; 'the arrangements they make for us are anything but satisfactory. We must leave to-morrow.' 'Yes, master,' I said approvingly : I could no longer conceal from myself the strong desire to see Patna which lurked in my heart.

Besides, there was no attraction in these villages of Bihar. I had wandered about in many villages in Bengal, but they bore no resemblance to these places. The people,

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the trees and vegetation, the climate—everything appeared alien to me. My whole nature longed day and night to flee from the oppressive exile which had become my portion.

Nowhere could I hear at even-fall the sound of the religious songs and music that can be heard in any village in Bengal ; the music of the gongs and bells at the evening service in the temples was not as solemn and melodious as ours ; and the blowing of conches in the twilight by the women of these parts was not half so pleasing as in my native land. What attraction, I asked myself, led people to live here ? If I had not seen these villages, I often thought, I should perhaps never have appreciated the sweetness and the romance of our village life in Bengal. Our drinking-water was foul, our climate malarious, our systems ruined by disease, our wealth and substance wasted by litigation, our villages teeming with faction ; and yet there was in it all a charm, a satisfying quality, which I began to be dimly conscious of, without being aware in what exactly the quality consisted.

Next day we struck our tent and started on our journey. Our *Sadhu Baba* and his retinue began to advance as quickly as possible towards the seat of *Bharadwaj Muni's* penances. But either because the *Baba* wanted an easy journey or because the holy ascetic had divined my inner longings, we did not camp within twenty miles of Patna. That my mind did harbour secret desires I cannot deny. 'No harm will be done,' I thought. 'I am an old sinner : a few days' association with holy people will purify my heart.' We camped this time towards twilight at a village called *Chhota Baghia*, a place some sixteen miles from the nearest railway-station. At this village I made the

acquaintance of a high-souled Bengali gentleman. It would be better for me not to reveal his actual name, for he is still alive and I know that he would feel embarrassed if I were to publish the many good acts which he has done in secret. So, for this narrative, he will be Ram Babu.¹ I cannot say what had led him to come and settle at this village and how he had come to acquire lands there and to live like a gentleman-farmer. All I know definitely is that he was living in peace and contentment with a second wife and three or four children.

We heard in the morning that smallpox had broken out at Chhota and Bada Baghia,² as well as in five or six neighbouring villages. It has often been noticed that it is during such periods of calamity that *sannyasis* are well served by village-folk. So our *Sadhu Baba* made up his mind to remain for some time at this village.

In passing I should like to note one or two things that I have observed about *sannyasis*. I have seen many of them, and mixed intimately with them several times in my life. I am not going to extenuate their faults, which are well-known to everybody. I will speak of their merits. We all know the type who becomes a *sannyasi* purely as a means of livelihood ; well, even amongst this class I have always noticed two good qualities. In the first place, their self-restraint, or want of susceptibility, if you will, in all matters relating to the other sex, is surprisingly great ; and secondly, their fear of death is as surprisingly small. Many of them no doubt adopt as their motto the

1. Ram Babu: in Bengali it is usual to call a gentleman by his 'Christian' name, with the suffix of 'Babu'.

2. *Chhota* means little and *Bada*, big. Little Baghia and Big Baghia must be two neighbouring villages.

maxim, ' While you live, live in happiness ',¹ but they give no thought to the question how to live *long*. Our *Sadhu Baba* was no exception to this rule : he was content to live happily, without worrying about the risks of life.

Numerous articles began to flow in thick and fast as presents in exchange for a few ashes from our *dhuni* and a few drops of water out of our *sadhu's* water-pot. They were very welcome.

Ram Babu came with his wife, weeping. His eldest son had been suffering from fever for four days and that morning smallpox had broken out on his body; a younger son too had been feverish and unconscious all day. Seeing that he was a Bengali, I introduced myself to them, and the acquaintance thus started soon ripened into intimacy.

After we had been in the village for about fifteen days, the *sadhuji* proposed to shift elsewhere. The epidemic was then at its height and Ram Babu's wife came weeping to me. '*Sannyasi-dada*,' she cried, 'you are not really a *sannyasi*. You have a heart to pity and love. My Nabin and Jiten will die if you leave them now. You cannot go away and leave us here ?' and she caught hold of my feet in respectful entreaty. My eyes too had filled with tears. Ram Babu joined his wife in her prayers and entreaties, and I could not go. I told our *guru*, 'My master, do you go ahead. If I cannot catch you up on your road, I have no doubt that I shall be able to take the dust of your feet at Prayag.' Our *guru* did not view the proposal with favour, but at length, after repeatedly warning me against unnecessary delays on the way, he started with his retinue, and I went to Ram Babu's house.

1. 'Live in happiness': a Sanskrit epicurean maxim.

I had won my *guru's* favour so successfully that had I stuck to him, I am sure I should have inherited his pony and his camel after his death. But it is now little use regretting my folly in having spurned the proffered gift of fortune.

The two boys recovered from their illness. The epidemic now appeared in its most terrible form. He who has not seen with his own eyes what this means can never be made to understand it. People began to flee, young and old, man, woman, child, all without distinction. In those houses in which one saw any traces of human habitation one would find only helpless mothers sitting by their stricken children.

Ram Babu also put all his belongings into bullock-carts, a thing he would have done much earlier if his children had not fallen ill. For the past five or six days I had noticed an overpowering lethargy creeping over my limbs and an uncontrollable depression of spirits. This was due, I thought, to the strain on my system caused by my having kept awake so many successive nights. One morning my head began to ache ; I could eat nothing all day, and in the evening I realised that I had got fever. That night the family was occupied in packing up, so there was no sleep for anyone. Rather late at night Ram Babu's wife came to me and said, '*Sannyasi-dada*, why don't you too come with us as far as Arrah ?'

'Yes, I'll come,' I said. 'But you will have to give me room in your carts.'

'But why, *sannyasi-dada* ? You know we could not get more than two carts,' said this sister of mine ; 'there is not even room for all of us.'

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‘I shan’t be able to walk, my sister,’ I said; ‘I’ve had fever all day.’

‘Fever? You don’t say so!’ she exclaimed horror-stricken, and without waiting for an answer hurriedly left the room.

I cannot say how long I slept. When I awoke it was day. All the other rooms were locked : there was not another soul in the house.

In front of my room passed the rough road that led to Arrah station. At least five or six carts passed by every day, laden with panic-stricken men and women. Late in the afternoon, after many attempts, I succeeded in getting room in one of them. The old Bihari gentleman who kindly took me into his cart let me down early next morning under a tree near the railway-station. As I could not even sit up, I lay under the tree. A short distance away from me there was an empty tin shed which had formerly been used as a travellers’ waiting-room but which was then of little use except as a place of shelter for cattle on a rainy day. The old gentleman brought a young Bengali from the station. With this young man’s assistance and the help of some porters I managed to get into the shed.

I count it a great misfortune that I am unable to give further details about this young man. At the time I was not in a position to ask questions. When, about five or six months later, I had the strength and the opportunity to make enquiries, I learnt that he had died of smallpox. I did however learn from him that he came from East Bengal and was a railway-servant on a pay of fifteen rupees a month. When he had helped to put me in the shed he went away and returned presently with a tattered

mattress, and at mid-day he brought me a cup of warm milk and made me drink it, saying, 'There is nothing to be afraid of, you will be all right.' He further said that if I wanted to inform any friend or relation of my illness he would send a telegram for me.

I was then in full possession of my faculties, but I felt that I should not retain them much longer. I felt that I should lose consciousness if the fever lasted five or six hours more. I had therefore to make up my mind quickly if I wanted to get anything done.

After dusk he appeared in an interval in his duty with a pot of water and a kerosene-burner. My brain was growing confused on account of the fever. I called him to me and said, 'Please look after me now and then so long as I don't lose consciousness; after that, I don't mind what happens, and please don't you bother either.'

He was an extremely tongue-tied young man; he had not the power of adequately expressing his thoughts. In reply he could merely say, 'No, no', and then stood silent.

'You wanted to send news for me,' I said. 'I am a *sannyasi* and have no one to call my own. But if you will be so good as to send a postcard to Piari Baiji at Patna, saying that Srikanta is lying dangerously ill in the tin shed near the Arrah station,—'

The young man was visibly embarrassed. 'I will write at once,' he said. 'I will send both the letter and the telegram', and he left me hurriedly. 'Oh God,' I murmured, 'may the news reach her.'

When I regained consciousness. I could not make out where I was. Raising my hand to my head I perceived

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that it lay on an ice-bag. On opening my eyes, I found that I was lying on a cot in a scantily furnished room. Near me was a stool on which stood a lamp and two or three bottles of medicine ; and close by somebody wrapped in a red-checked cloth was asleep on a rude cot. For a long time I could remember nothing. Then memories began to dawn, memories as of dreams in some fitful sleep : the coming and going of many people, their lifting me into a litter, my head being shaved, my being given medicines, and many other things.

When after some time my companion roused himself, I saw that he was a young Bengali of good breeding, not more than eighteen or nineteen years of age. Just then some one spoke to him from her seat at the head of my bed, and I recognised the voice.

‘Banku,’ said Piari in a low voice, ‘why don’t you change the ice, my son ?’

‘I am changing it,’ said the young man. ‘Can’t you get to sleep ? When the doctor has said it isn’t smallpox, there is nothing to be alarmed about.’

‘Don’t imagine, my child,’ said Piari, ‘that a woman’s fears are allayed by a doctor’s words ! Don’t worry about me, Banku. Just change the ice and go to sleep : don’t stay awake any longer.’

Banku came, changed the ice, and went back to his cot. Soon I could tell by his heavy, regular breathing that he was asleep.

I called out softly, ‘Piari’.

In an instant she bent over me and wiped the drops of perspiration from my brow with the skirt of her *sari*.

‘Can you recognise me?’ she asked anxiously. ‘How do you feel now?’

‘I feel all right. When did you come? Is this Arrah?’

‘Yes, we shall go home to-morrow.’

‘Where to?’

‘To Patna. I can’t leave you now anywhere outside my house.’

‘Who is this boy, Rajlakshmi?’

‘He is Banku, my co-wife’s son. But he is just like my own son to me. He stays with me and studies at Patna College. Don’t talk any more to-night; sleep. I will tell you everything to-morrow’, and she put her hand over my mouth to stop my talk. I seized it, and, taking it in mine, turned on my side and lay still.

XII

IT was not smallpox but some kind of fever that had prostrated me. As soon as Piari got the news she had come with Banku, two servants, and her maid. She had rented a house at once, and, after removing me to it, had collected all the doctors of the town for consultation. All this I learned later.

As soon as it was dawn Piari said, 'Banku, don't be late, my son ; go and reserve a second-class compartment for us. I dare not keep him here another hour.' Banku's eyes were still heavy with sleep. Without opening them he drawled, 'What nonsense, Mother. How can he be moved in this condition ?'

'Get up first, Banku,' said Piari, laughing a little. 'After you've done that and have had your wash, I will discuss the question of moving him. Do be a good boy and get up, my son.'

Accordingly Banku left his bed, had his morning wash, dressed, and went to the station. The morning was just breaking, and there was no one else in the room. I called in a low voice, 'Piari'. Another cot had been placed at the head of my bed and on it Piari lay half-asleep, worn out by her long vigil. At the sound of my voice she sat up with a start and bent over me. 'So you are awake,' she said softly. 'I have been awake for quite some time.' Piari passed her hand with anxious care over my head and brow, and said, 'There is hardly any fever

now. Why don't you try to sleep a little ?' 'I have been doing nothing else for days, Piari. How long have I had this fever ?'

'Thirteen days.' She immediately became grave, and said with a seriousness worthy of an elderly matron, 'Please don't call me by that name before the boys. You have always called me Lakshmi;¹ why not call me that?'

I had recovered my normal consciousness two days before; I remembered the incidents of the last two days, 'All right,' I said. Then recalling the subject I had wanted to discuss with her, 'You are trying to move me, but I have given you a lot of trouble already, and I don't want to give you any more.'

'What do you want to do then ?'

'I think that if I remain here as I am I shall be all right in three or four days more. You had better stay here these few days and then go home.'

'What will you do then, if I may ask ?'

'Something or other.'

'Probably,' rejoined Piari with a smile. Then she rose and seated herself on the edge of my cot. She gazed at me for a few moments and then, smiling again, said, 'I know this fever will be cured in eight or ten days, if not in three or four, as you say. But will you tell me when you will be cured of your real malady ?'

'My real malady ? And what may that be, pray ?'

1. *Lakshmi* from *Raj-lakshmi*. Piari being the name she was known by as a singing-girl. 'Piari' means 'dear' or 'a darling' and is not a name for respectable ladies.

'To think one way, to speak another, and to act a third : that is the distressing complaint you've been suffering from all your life. You know as well as I do that I shan't consider you fit to take care of yourself for at least a month, and yet you must say, "I've given you such a lot of trouble, leave me !" My dear, kind-hearted man, if you really cared so much for me, how could you take it into your head to turn a *sannyasi*, and get into all this terrible mess ! When I came, I found you lying unconscious on a rotten, old mattress laid on the bare ground, your head covered with long hair that was matted with dirt and dust, all your body tricked out with beads, and two brass bangles decorating your wrists. O my God, how could I help crying when I saw you in such a state !' As she spoke her eyes filled with tears. She wiped them quickly away with her hand and continued, 'Banku asked me, "Who is this, mother ?" but how could I tell him, this boy who is like my own son? Oh, what a dreadful day that was ! What an auspicious day, I sometimes think, it must have been when your eyes first met mine at school ! The pain you have made me suffer, my dear, is what no one else in the wide world has ever made me, or will ever make me, suffer ! Well, they say small-pox has broken out in the town ; I'll count it great luck if I can get away with you all in safety.' And she heaved a deep sigh.

We left Arrah that night, a young doctor accompanying us as far as Patna. Twelve or thirteen days after our arrival at Patna, I recovered from my illness almost completely. One morning I went through the rooms in Piari's house and was somewhat surprised at the quality and amount of her furniture. This was not the first time that I had seen a house belonging to a singing-girl. The

furniture was good and valuable, but, considering the part of the town that she lived in, among wealthy, fashionable, and half-educated Marwaris,¹ the wonder was that she was contented with so little. In this respect her house bore no resemblance to other houses that I had seen belonging to women of her profession. The impression one usually gets on entering such a house with its numerous candelabras and lamps, pictures, glass cases, and mirrors, is one of overloaded stuffiness and want of freedom : one is afraid even to breathe. The innumerable articles which admirers shower as presents, so fill the rooms that one is tempted to think that they, like their donors, have to jostle and elbow one another in order to keep their ground. But here I did not notice a single superfluous article of furniture ; what I saw appeared to have been selected for the personal use of the owner of the house, and not to have been thrust in as a kind of intrusion, so to speak, of some one else's wanton desire overriding the taste and will of the owner. Another thing that attracted my notice was that there were no arrangements for singing or music in the house of Piari, the celebrated singing-girl of Patna. Wandering from one room to another, I came at last to the door of a room in one corner of the first floor. One glance at the interior was sufficient to show that this was her bedroom. But how different from what my imagination had pictured it to be ! The floor was of white stone, and the walls shone white and fresh as milk. On one side of the room was a small cot behind which stood an iron safe ; on the other side, a clothes-rack with a

1. Marwaris: a mercantile community whose home is in Marwar, a part of Rajputana, but whose business ability has given them the control of a large part of the trade of Bengal.

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few clothes neatly arranged on it : nothing else. I felt some delicacy in entering the room with shoes on : I left them outside the door and, as this first attempt to walk any distance had wearied me, I sat down, absent-mindedly, on her bed,—a thing I should not have done, I am sure, if there had been anything else in the room to sit upon. Shading the open window in front of me was an enormous *neem* tree ; and a gentle breeze was blowing through it. As I sat gazing listlessly at it, my absent-mindedness must have deepened. My attention was suddenly aroused by a sweet tune, and looking round I saw that Piari had entered the room humming a song. She had been to bathe in the Ganges, and had come to change her wet clothes. She had not yet seen me. She went straight to the clothes-rack and was about to take one of the *saris* arranged on it, when I suddenly burst out, ‘ Why do you not take your clothes with you to the bathing-place ? ’

She looked at me surprised and then broke out into a smile. ‘ Well, I never ! ’ she said. ‘ You come into my room like a thief,—no, no, don’t get up, don’t go—I’ll go into the other room and change ’, and she stepped out lightly with the silk *sari* in her hand. She came back in a few minutes with a cheerful face, and asked me with a smile, ‘ You know there is nothing in my room. What did you come here to steal ? Are you sure it isn’t me ? ’

‘ How can you think me so ungrateful ? ’ I asked. ‘ You have done so much for me, and can I now end by stealing you, of all things ? I hope I am not so covetous.’

Piari’s face became pale. I had not thought that my words could give her pain. I had no wish to pain her, especially when I was thinking of leaving the place within

two or three days. With a forced laugh, which I hoped would dispel the effect of my unfortunate remark, I said, 'I can't help admiring your intelligence : how can one come to steal a thing that belongs to one already ?'

But it was not possible to take her in so easily. 'Oh well,' she said, 'you need not show your gratitude so plainly. It is enough for me that you remembered me in your illness.'

The feeling that I had saddened such a fresh, joyous face on that sunny morning brought a pang to my heart. The fading of her smile made it clear what sweetness had lain in it. 'Lakshmi,' I said in a tone of repentance, hoping to restore that lost sweetness, 'you know I have hidden nothing from you, absolutely nothing. If you had not come, I should have lain like a corpse in the dust or like refuse, for no one would have even thought of sending me to the hospital. Do you remember writing to me. "Remember me in your day of trouble, if not of happiness"? My remembering your request shows that fate had reserved for me a longer lease of life ; of that I feel certain.'

'Quite certain ?'

'Quite.'

'Then you must admit that it is to me that you owe your life ?'

'I have no doubt of it.'

'Then you also must admit that I can claim it as mine, in all fairness ?'

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‘Of course you can. But my life is such an insignificant little thing that there is no reason for you to be at all greedy about it.’

‘Well,’ said Piari, breaking into laughter. ‘it’s not a bad thing that you know your value after all!’ But the next instant she became grave, and said, ‘Joking apart, now that you are all right, more or less, when do you think you will go?’

At first I did not quite catch her meaning. I answered gravely, ‘There is no great need for me to go anywhere. So I am thinking of staying here for some time longer.’

‘But,’ said Piari, ‘my son often comes from Bankipur nowadays. If you stay much longer he may begin to think something.’

‘Let him, then!’ I exclaimed. ‘Surely you are not afraid of his opinion? I tell you I’m not going to leave all this comfort and luxury before I have to.’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ Piari remarked dryly. Suddenly she got up and left the room.

Next evening as I lay in an easy chair on the verandah to the west of my room, looking at the sunset, Banku came. I had not had an opportunity before this to have a good talk with him.

‘Banku,’ I asked, motioning him to a chair, ‘what do you study?’

He was a very quiet, honest lad. ‘Last year I passed the Matric., sir,’ he said.

‘Then you are at the Bankipur College now?’

‘Yes, sir.’

'How many brothers and sisters have you?'

'I have no brothers, but four sisters.'

'And are they all married?'

'Yes, sir, Mother has got them married.'

'Is your own mother alive, Banku?'

'Yes, sir, she lives in our village.'

'Has your mother here ever been to your home in the village?'

'Yes, several times; she was there five or six months ago.'

'Isn't there any talk about it, any gossip, in your village?'

Banku sat quiet for a little while and then said, 'What if there is? I'm not going to leave Mother because they've boycotted us. How many of them have got such a mother?'

The question came to my lips, 'How did you learn to love your mother so?' but I remained silent.

'Do you think, sir,' Banku went on, 'that there is anything wrong in being fond of music? And that is the only charge they can bring against Mother. She never indulges in scandal and gossip. Besides, she pays the expenses of education for the sons of some of her worst enemies. In winter she gives clothing to a lot of people, and distributes blankets. Is there wrong in all this, sir?'

'On the contrary,' I said, 'it shows great kindness.'

'Exactly, sir,' Banku agreed, with fresh enthusiasm.

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‘Where would you find so rotten a village as ours, sir? Why, when our new house was built, my mother, seeing how terribly the people suffered from want of water, thought of converting the pit from which the earth for the bricks had been taken, into a tank. She spent three thousand rupees on it, and a fine tank it is, sir, with a brick-built flight of steps down to the water. But they wouldn’t let her perform the necessary ceremony to dedicate it as a public tank. Such fine water, but no one could taste it, touch it. Such a rascally set of people they are, sir. They are all dying of envy at our fine brick-built house. Don’t you see, sir?’

‘Indeed!’ I said, affecting surprise, ‘they would suffer terribly and yet not use the water?’

‘Exactly, sir,’ said Banku, smiling. ‘But how long could this state of things go on? In the first year nobody came near the tank. But now the poor people and lower castes all use the water, and even people of the higher castes take water from it surreptitiously in summer. And yet they didn’t let Mother perform the necessary ceremony. You little know, sir, how painful this has been to her.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘this, I suppose, is an instance of cutting off one’s nose to spite one’s face.’

‘Exactly, sir!’ Banku remarked with great emphasis. ‘It is a blessing to live boycotted and alone in such a village: don’t you think so, sir?’ I merely nodded in reply, without committing myself to a definite ‘yes’ or ‘no’. But that hardly stemmed the tide of Banku’s enthusiasm. I saw that the boy really loved his step-mother. The presence of a good listener gave the reins

to his tongue, and his unrestrained praise of her began to be almost too much for my patience.

At last he suddenly became aware that for a long time I had not spoken. Feeling embarrassed, he sought a digression by asking me, 'Are you not going to stay here for some time longer, sir?

'No,' I said smiling, 'I go to-morrow morning.'

'To-morrow, sir? But you are not quite strong yet. Do you think that you are completely cured?'

'I thought so this morning,' I answered, 'but now I must think otherwise : I have had a headache since noon.'

'Then why are you in such a hurry to go, sir? I hope you are comfortable here?' and he looked at me anxiously. I tried to read his meaning from the expression of his face. So far as I could read it, I saw no necessity for concealing the truth. Banku was confused, and tried to hide his confusion. 'Please do not go away so soon,' he said.

'Why?' I asked.

'Mother is most happy while you are here,' he answered, and all at once he blushed and left me abruptly. I saw that though the boy was simple, he was by no means a fool. Thinking over his conduct, I understood what Piari had meant when she said to me, 'He will begin to think if you stay longer.' The boy worshipped her. In his eyes she was above reproach: his mother could do no wrong. And Piari was resolved to live up to his ideal of her. All at once my eyes were opened and I realized the full meaning of this relationship to Piari and saw her for the first time in her adopted guise of mother. It was a revelation. It was not difficult for me to imagine

the ardent longings of Piari's heart ; nor was it, I fancy, a sin to think of her as a free woman in every way, free in every aspect of her life. Yet I could see how, the moment she had taken this poor boy as her own son, she had voluntarily put a hundred chains round her feet. Whatever she might be by herself, she had now to give herself the honour due to a mother. However strong her desires and untamed passions might be in urging her on the downward path, could she forget that a boy now called her his own mother, and could she in any way dishonour the mother whom he revered and loved and who stood before him in the full glory and purity of their mutual relations ? I did not know who in the first flush of her ardent and passionate youth had been inspired by love to call her his ' Piari ' or Beloved, but I remembered how she had wanted to conceal the very name from the boy whom she called her son.

The sun went down before my eyes. As I sat gazing at the purple grandeur of the western sky, my heart seemed purified and elevated by its solemn influence. I realized how narrow and mean, how far from the truth, had been my estimate of Rajlakshmi's character. However strictly our mutual relations might preserve an outward semblance of propriety, however discreetly we might try to create around them an atmosphere of sweetness and light, there could be no doubt that our desires were rushing headlong to meet in one fierce, irresistible passion. But I saw to-day that such a thing was impossible. Suddenly, like the towering Himalayas, Banku's mother stood between me and Rajlakshmi. ' I must go to-morrow,' I said to myself. ' But let me not, in casting up my accounts, try to keep a balance in my favour. This departure of mine must be a real departure. Let me not deceive myself

and leave any subtle tie behind me that would make it possible for me to come back again.'

As I sat there in a mood of abstraction, Rajlakshmi crossed the verandah on her way to one of the rooms : in her hand she carried a censer in which incense was burning. She stopped as she passed me, and said, ' You mustn't stay out here in this chill air when you've got a headache. Go and sit inside.'

I felt inclined to laugh. ' You surprise me, Lakkhi,' said I. ' There is no chill in the air.'

' If there is no chill,' she replied, ' there is a cold draught. That's not good for you either.'

' You are again mistaken. There is no draught either.'

' Everything is my mistake,' said Rajlakshmi. ' But your headache can't be a mistake. I'm sure. Why don't you go inside and lie down a little ? What is Ratan doing ? Why can't he put a little eau-de-cologne on your forehead ? The servants of this house are the laziest rascals I've ever seen ! ' and she vanished into the house.

When Ratan appeared in my room a few minutes later with eau-de-cologne, water, and other accessories, contrite and sorry, and began to express repeatedly his regrets for his neglect of me, I could not help laughing.

This put some heart into him and he said in a low voice, ' Do I not know, sir, that I am not to blame for this ? But you don't surely expect one to tell her, sir, that when she is angry she finds fault with everyone in the house ? '

' Why is she angry ? ' I asked.

‘Who can tell, sir? It’s my belief, sir, that big folk get into a temper for nothing, and get over it for nothing too. God help the servants unless they can make themselves scarce, sir, when they’re in a temper!’

‘What do they do then, Ratan,—cut off their heads?’ asked a voice suddenly from behind the door. ‘If big folk’s houses are so inconvenient, why don’t you go elsewhere?’

At this question from his mistress, Ratan was stricken into shamefaced silence. ‘What kept you so long, I wonder,’ she went on. ‘Mr. Srikanta has a headache: I told you about it as soon as I heard it from Banku. And that’s why, I suppose, you come here at eight o’clock and sing my praises. Well, you need not remain in this house after to-morrow: you can find a job elsewhere. Do you understand?’

When she had gone, poor Ratan applied the eau-de-cologne and water to my forehead and began to fan me. Almost immediately Rajlakshmi returned. ‘So you are going home to-morrow?’ she asked.

I had planned to go, but I was not going home. So I said evasively, ‘Yes, I’m going to-morrow morning.’

‘Which train will you go by?’

‘Well, I shall leave in the morning, and take any train that I can get.’

‘Very well, I had better send some one to the station to get a time-table,’ she said, and left me.

Ratan finished his task and went away. Gradually the household sounds subsided, till at last everything was quiet and I knew that everyone in the house was in bed.

But sleep did not come to me. One question tormented me. What could have annoyed Piari ? What had I done to make her anxious for my departure ? Ratan had said that big folk get into a temper for nothing. Whether or not this was true of other people, it certainly could not apply to Piari. She had immense self-control and commonsense, as I had good reason to know. Nor could I remember having given expression to anything to which any one could take exception. Whatever might be said about my commonsense, my self-control was in no way less than hers, and I did not believe that it was possible for me, whatever might be my inner impulses, to give utterance to them even in the wildest delirium. If, on the other hand, she had acted in any way to cause herself regret or a twinge of conscience, she could hardly blame me for it. So why should she be angry with me ? Her inexplicable indifference on the eve of my departure hurt and bewildered me.

Late at night a slight sound roused me, and, opening my eyes, I saw Rajlakshmi enter the room noiselessly, remove the lamp from the table, and put it far away from me near the door so as to shade the light completely from my eyes. The window in front of me was open ; she closed it and stood near my bed. She seemed to be thinking something over in her mind. Then she slipped her hand inside the curtain, and laid it gently on my forehead, as she had so often done in the days of my illness. I knew that she believed me to be asleep, and though I was conscious of every movement she made as she bent above me, I did not betray the fact, but lay with eyes closed breathing as regularly as my quick-beating heart would allow. She evidently satisfied herself that I had no fever, for in a moment she withdrew her hand, tucked in the

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curtain, and left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

I had seen all, and understood all. She had come in secret, and I allowed her to go in secret. But she could not know how much of herself she left with me in the lonely stillness of the night. In the morning I woke up in a fever. My eyes smarted with pain and my head ached so badly that leaving the bed was torture. Yet I felt that I must go. I could no longer trust myself in that house. I might break down at any moment. And it was not only for my own sake, after all. I had to leave Rajlakshmi for her own sake : of that there could now be no manner of doubt.

I saw that she had washed away much of the stain of her past life. To-day boys and girls had gathered round her as round their own mother, and had created a sanctuary by their love and devotion. Was my love to manifest itself by working her degradation ? Was I to stain my life by ruining hers ?

Piari entered the room. 'How are you feeling now ?' she asked.

'Not very bad,' I said. 'I shall be able to go.'

'Must you go to-day ?'

'Yes, I must.'

'Well, then, do write as soon as you get home, or we shall be very anxious.'

Her imperturbable self-command charmed me. 'Yes,' I said at once, 'I shall go home and nowhere else. And I will write'.

‘Do,’ she said. ‘And I shall ask you a question or two now and then by letter.’

When I had left the house and was about to get into the palanquin, I looked up and caught sight of Piari who stood watching my departure from the upper verandah. She did not move or speak and, looking into her face, I could not guess what emotions lay behind her clear, calm gaze.

A sigh escaped me as I got into the palanquin. I was learning that a great love not only binds, it separates. It would not have been possible for a lesser love than ours to push me out of that heaven of daily and hourly affection, where I was hedged in with luxury and comfort, for the sake of a greater good, a greater honour. As the bearers carried the palanquin swiftly towards the station, my heart cried out to the woman I had just left, ‘Sweetheart, do not grieve, for it is a good thing that I am going from you. I have no power to repay my debts to you in this short life of mine. Let me not dishonour you by mispending the life that you have given me with your own hands. However far I may be from you, my own, let me keep this vow forever!’